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WHAT IF™
DR. DOOM™
HAD BECOME A HERO?
HE WOULD STRUGGLE WITH MEPHISTO--
BUCKLER & McLEOD
4
-- AND HE WOULD SUFFER ... AS NO MAN HAS EVER SUFFERED BEFORE!

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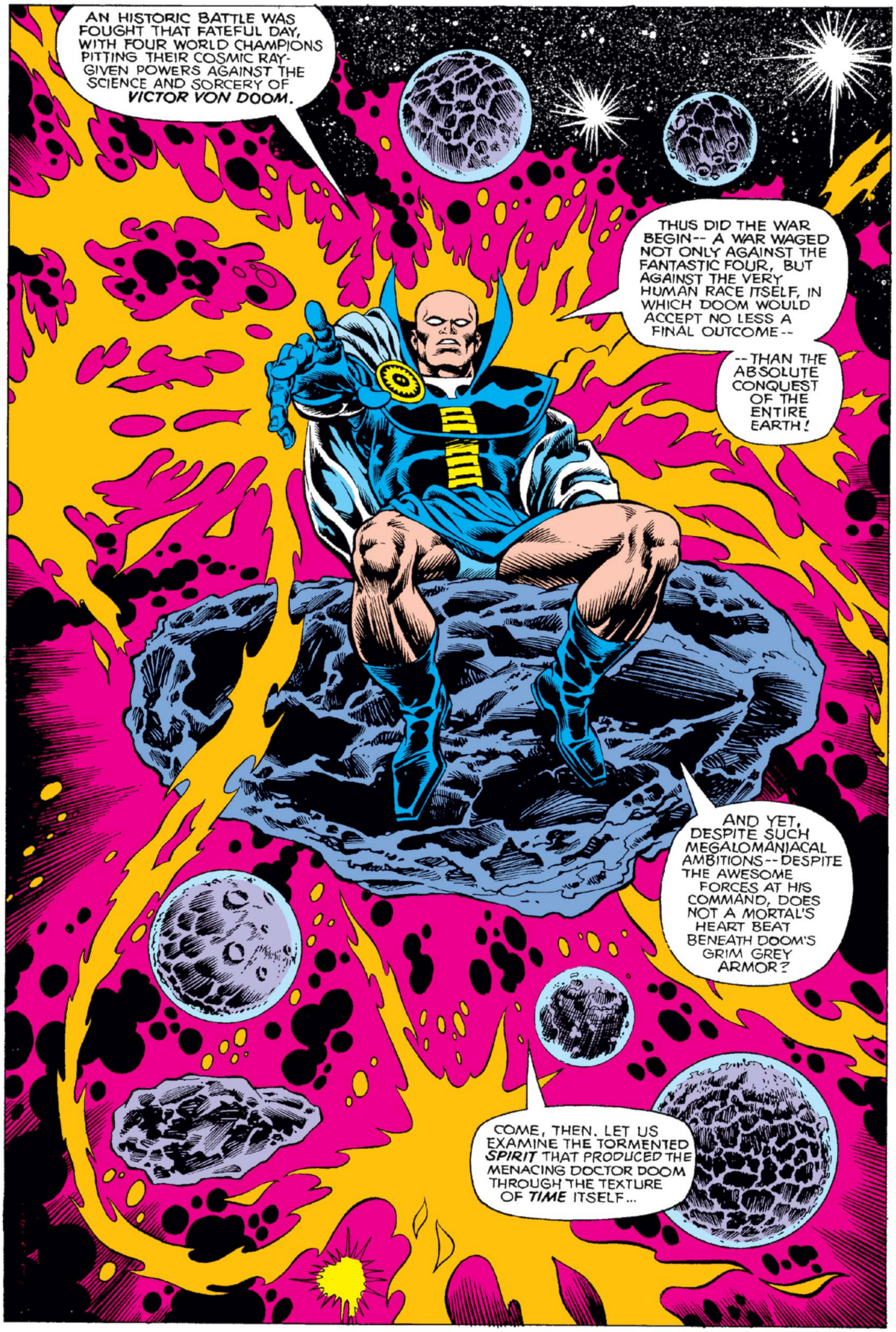
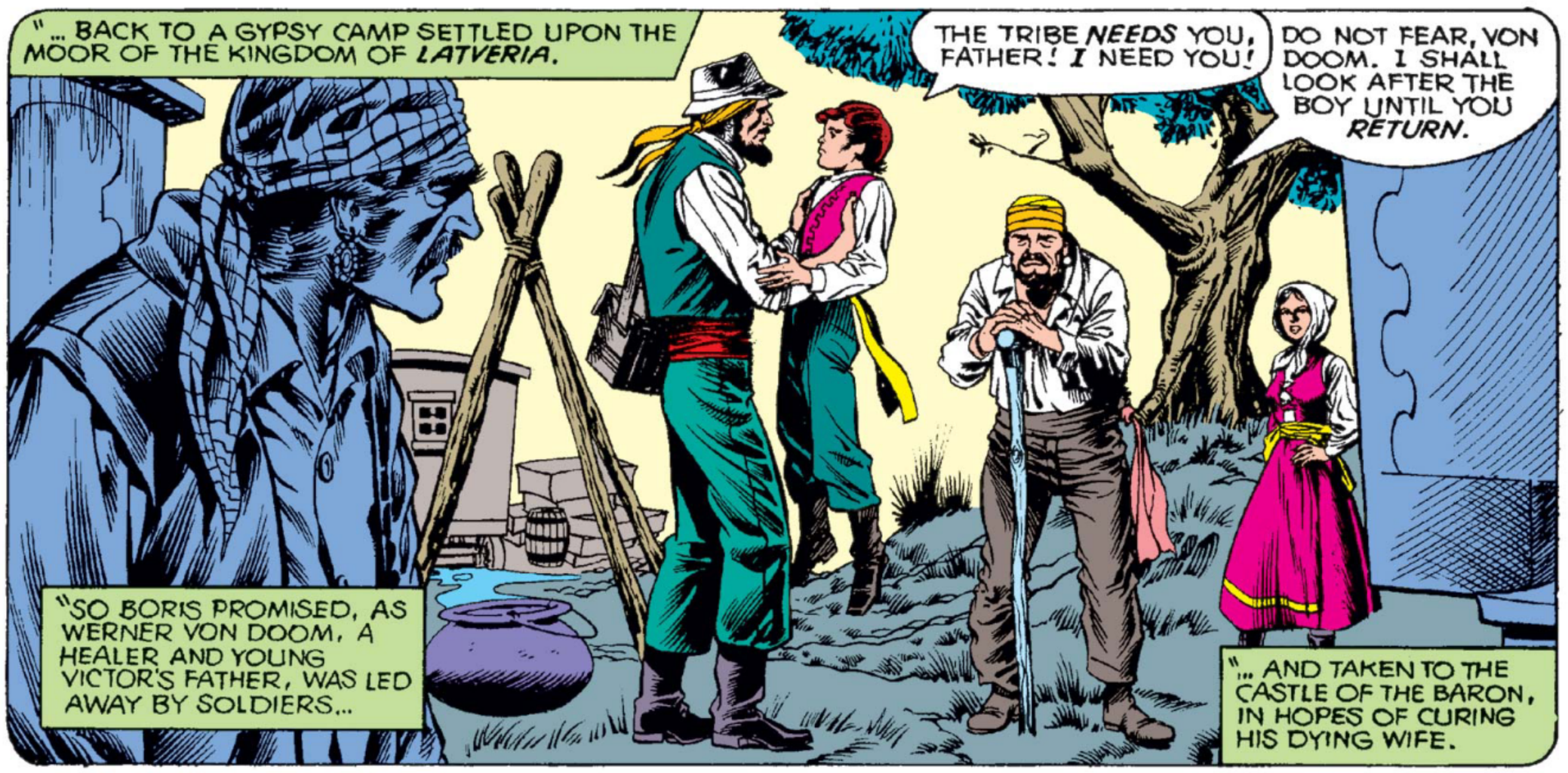
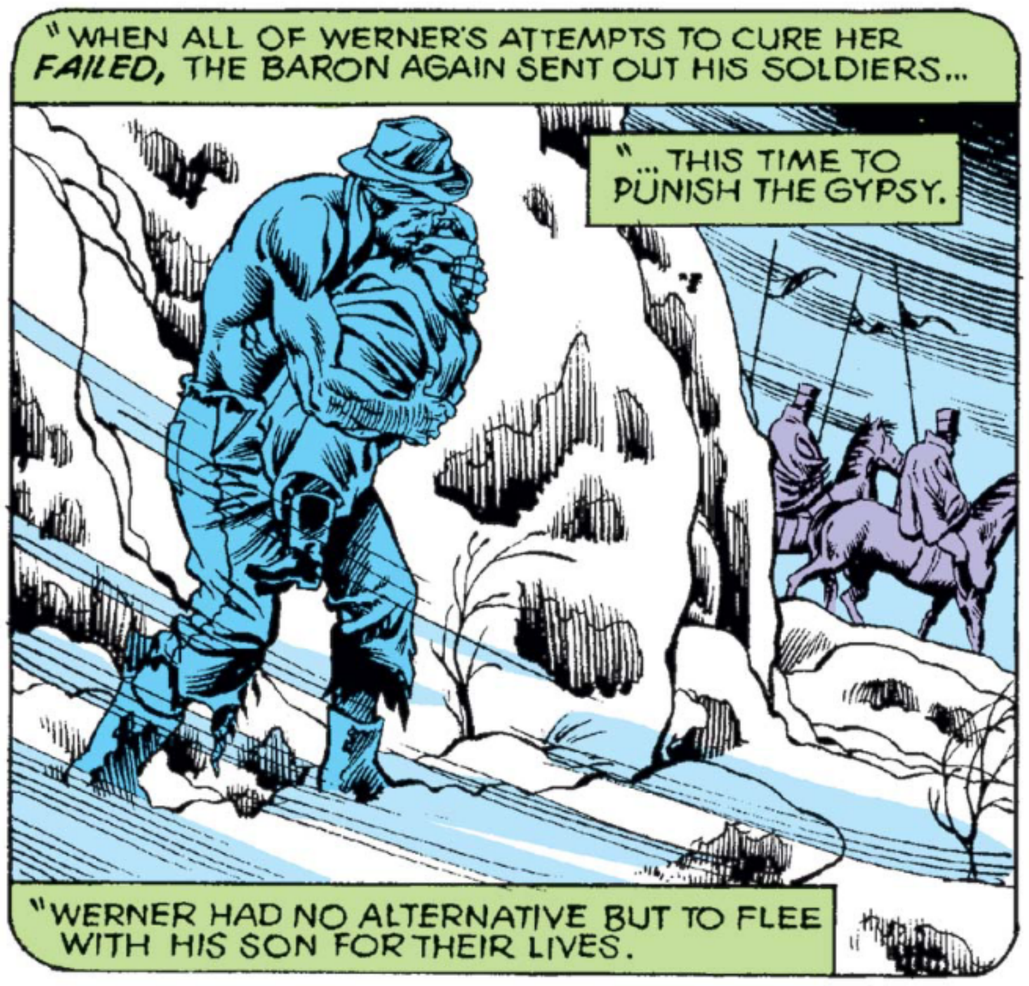

AN HISTORIC BATTLE WAS FOUGHT THAT FATEFUL DAY, WITH FOUR WORLD CHAMPIONS PITTING THEIR COSMIC RAY-GIVEN POWERS AGAINST THE SCIENCE AND SORCERY OF *VICTOR VON DOOM*.
THUS DID THE WAR BEGIN-- A WAR WAGED NOT ONLY AGAINST THE FANTASTIC FOUR, BUT AGAINST THE VERY HUMAN RACE ITSELF, IN WHICH DOOM WOULD ACCEPT NO LESS A FINAL OUTCOME--
--THAN THE ABSOLUTE CONQUEST OF THE ENTIRE EARTH!
AND YET, DESPITE SUCH MEGALOMANIACAL AMBITIONS--DESPITE THE AWESOME FORCES AT HIS COMMAND, DOES NOT A MORTAL'S HEART BEAT BENEATH DOOM'S GRIM GREY ARMOR?
COME, THEN. LET US EXAMINE THE TORMENTED *SPIRIT* THAT PRODUCED THE MENACING DOCTOR DOOM THROUGH THE TEXTURE OF *TIME* ITSELF...

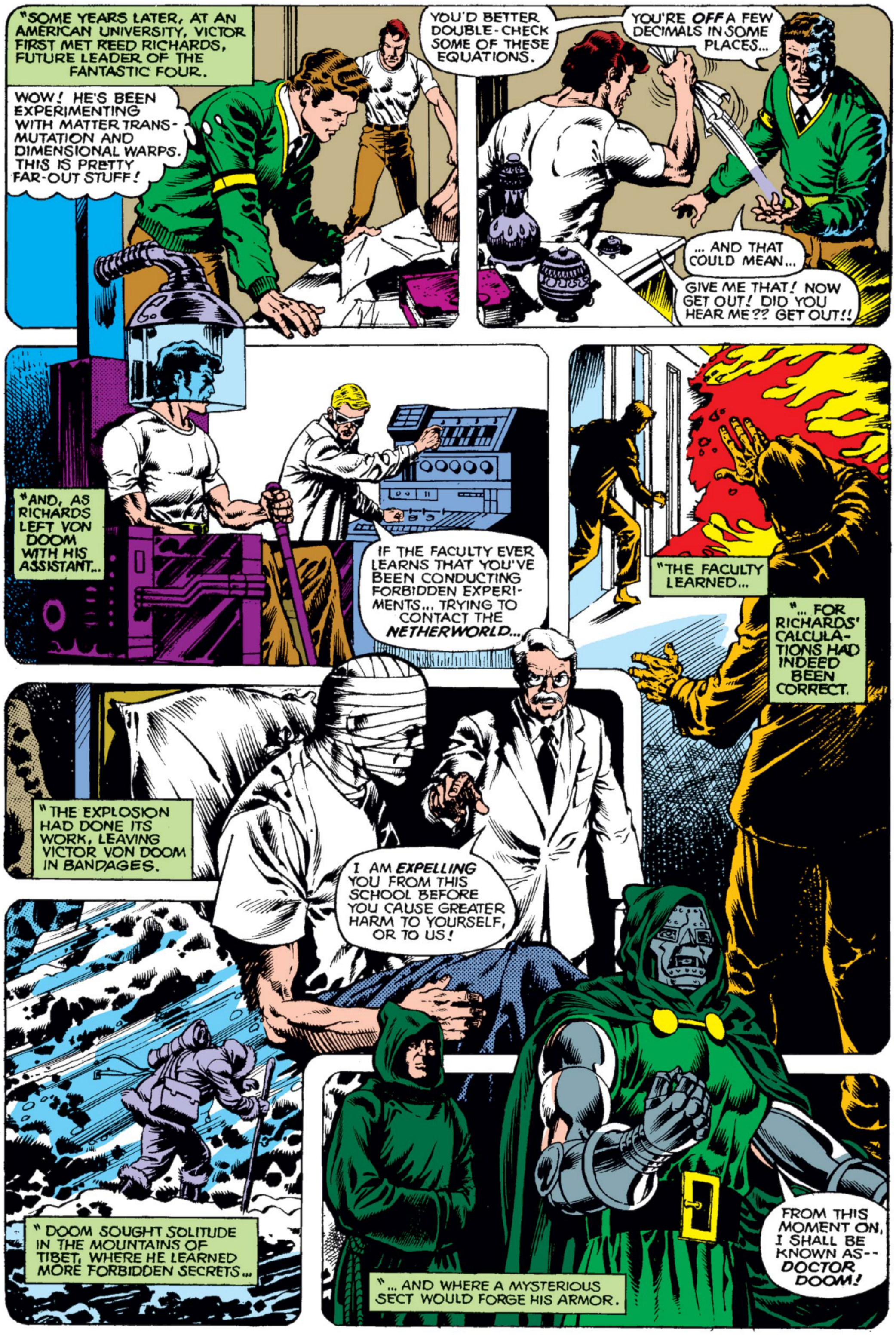

"... BACK TO A GYPSY CAMP SETTLED UPON THE MOOR OF THE KINGDOM OF *LATVERIA*.
THE TRIBE *NEEDS* YOU, FATHER! *I* NEED YOU!
DO NOT FEAR, VON DOOM. I SHALL LOOK AFTER THE BOY UNTIL YOU *RETURN*.
"SO BORIS PROMISED, AS WERNER VON DOOM, A HEALER AND YOUNG VICTOR'S FATHER, WAS LED AWAY BY SOLDIERS...
"... AND TAKEN TO THE CASTLE OF THE BARON, IN HOPES OF CURING HIS DYING WIFE.

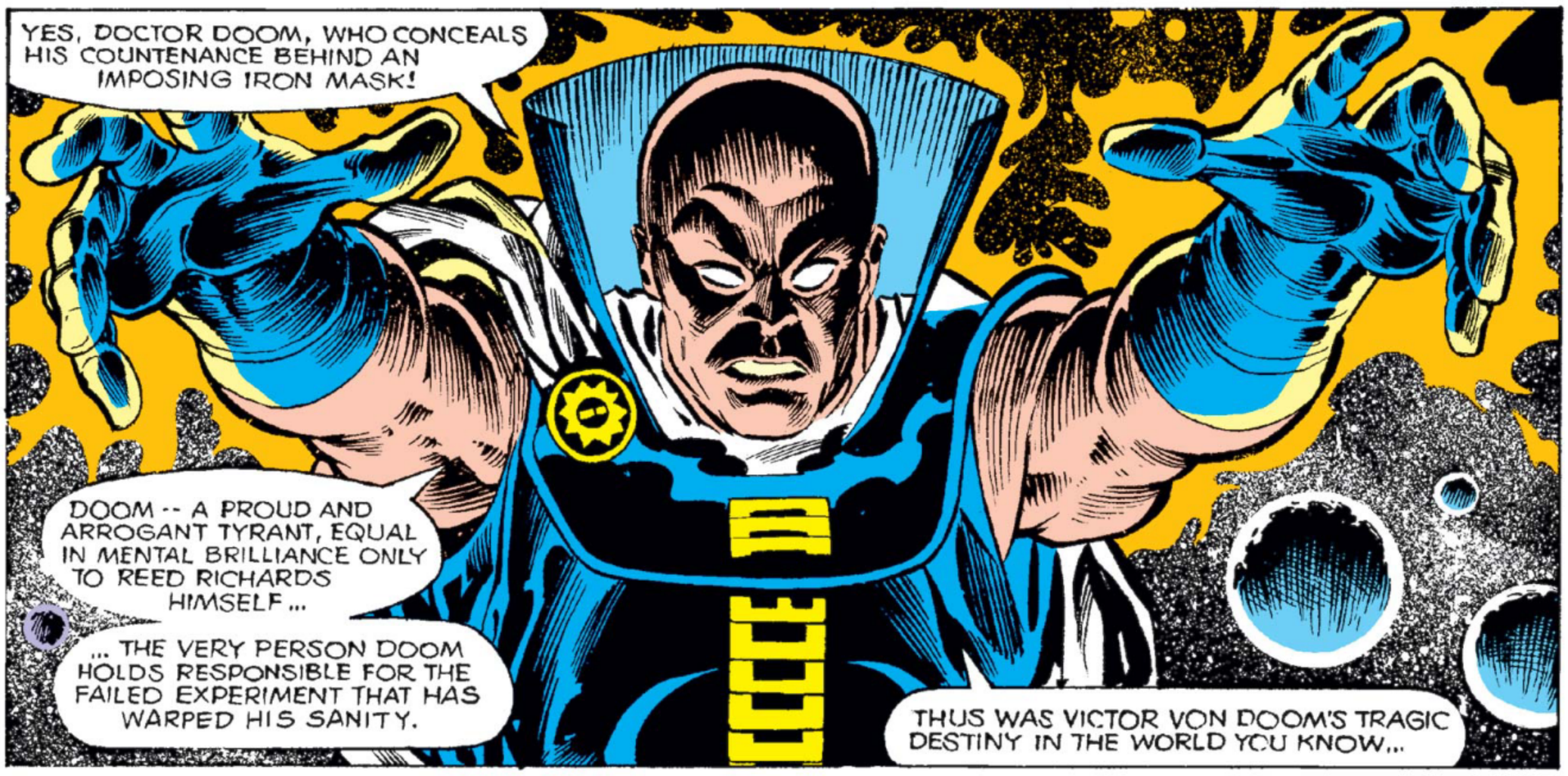

"WHEN ALL OF WERNER'S ATTEMPTS TO CURE HER *FAILED*, THE BARON AGAIN SENT OUT HIS SOLDIERS...
"... THIS TIME TO PUNISH THE GYPSY.
"WERNER HAD NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO FLEE WITH HIS SON FOR THEIR LIVES.

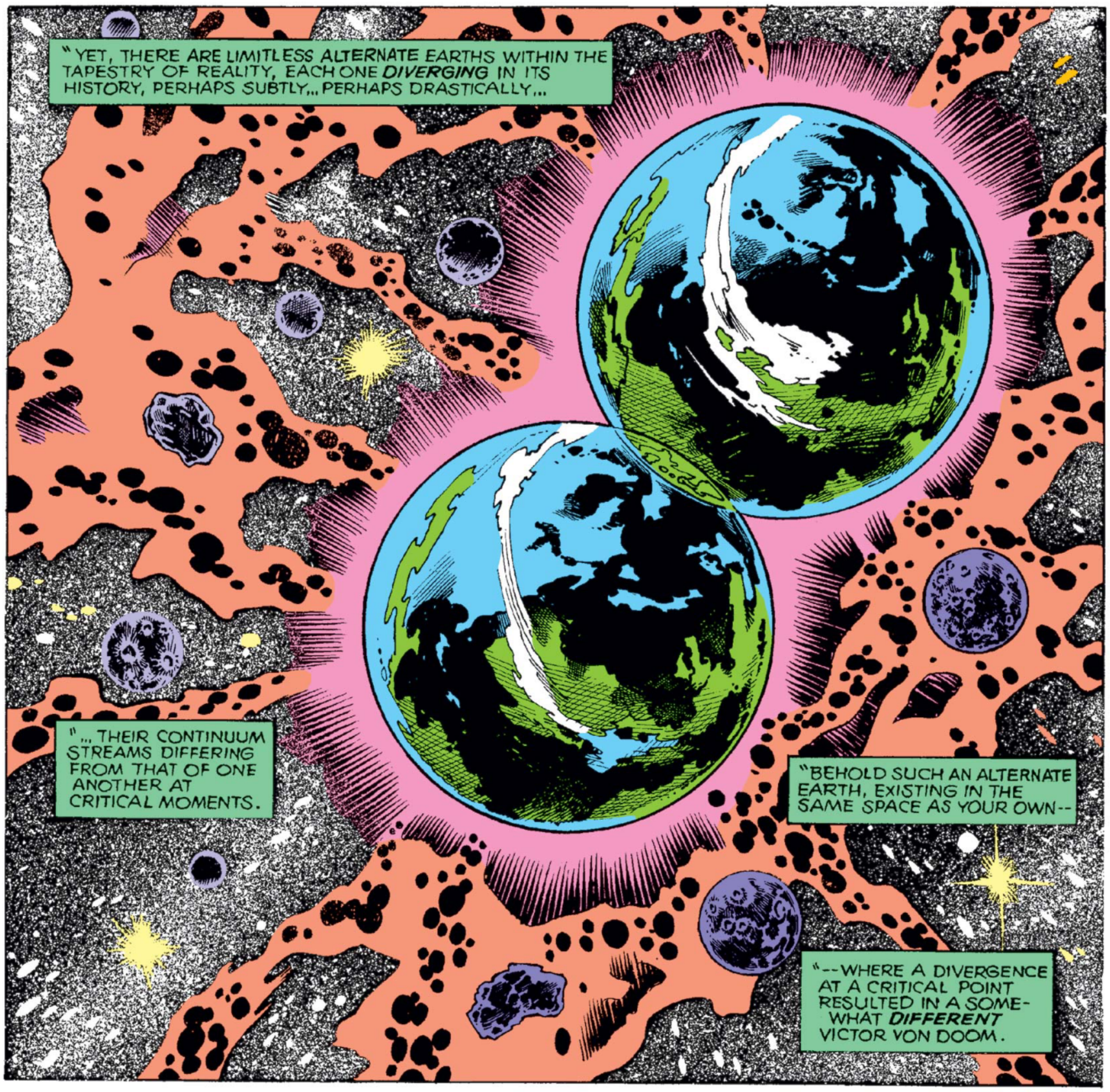
"SOME-WHAT LATER...
VON DOOM! IT'S ME -- BORIS!!
THE SOLDIERS HAVE GONE! VON DOOM!
"THE TWO FUGITIVES WERE NEARLY *FROZEN*...

"... AND ONLY *ONE* OF THEM SURVIVED THE ORDEALS OF THEIR FLIGHT.
THEY MURDERED MY *MOTHER*... WHEN I WAS BUT AN INFANT!
AND NOW THEY HAVE SLAIN MY *FATHER!*
THEY'LL PAY FOR THAT! ALL OF MAN-KIND SHALL PAY!!

"THEN, AFTER ALL BUT THE GIRL *VALERIA* HAD GONE...
VICTOR, WHAT ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR?
AMONG THESE HEIRLOOMS HIDDEN BEHIND MY FATHER'S HERBS AND REMEDIES...
... ARE STRANGE OBJECTS THAT BEAR MY *MOTHER'S* NAME!
"THEY WERE THE POTIONS AND SECRETS OF A WITCH.


"SOME YEARS LATER, AT AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, VICTOR FIRST MET REED RICHARDS, FUTURE LEADER OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR.
WOW! HE'S BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH MATTER TRANSMUTATION AND DIMENSIONAL WARPS. THIS IS PRETTY FAR-OUT STUFF!
YOU'D BETTER DOUBLE-CHECK SOME OF THESE EQUATIONS.
YOU'RE OFF A FEW DECIMALS IN SOME PLACES...
... AND THAT COULD MEAN...
GIVE ME THAT! NOW GET OUT! DID YOU HEAR ME?? GET OUT!!
"AND, AS RICHARDS LEFT VON DOOM WITH HIS ASSISTANT...
IF THE FACULTY EVER LEARNS THAT YOU'VE BEEN CONDUCTING FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENTS... TRYING TO CONTACT THE NETHERWORLD...
"THE FACULTY LEARNED...
"... FOR RICHARDS' CALCULATIONS HAD INDEED BEEN CORRECT.
"THE EXPLOSION HAD DONE ITS WORK, LEAVING VICTOR VON DOOM IN BANDAGES.
I AM EXPELLING YOU FROM THIS SCHOOL BEFORE YOU CAUSE GREATER HARM TO YOURSELF, OR TO US!
"DOOM SOUGHT SOLITUDE IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TIBET, WHERE HE LEARNED MORE FORBIDDEN SECRETS...
"... AND WHERE A MYSTERIOUS SECT WOULD FORGE HIS ARMOR.
FROM THIS MOMENT ON, I SHALL BE KNOWN AS-- DOCTOR DOOM!


YES, DOCTOR DOOM, WHO CONCEALS HIS COUNTENANCE BEHIND AN IMPOSING IRON MASK!
DOOM -- A PROUD AND ARROGANT TYRANT, EQUAL IN MENTAL BRILLIANCE ONLY TO REED RICHARDS HIMSELF...
... THE VERY PERSON DOOM HOLDS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FAILED EXPERIMENT THAT HAS WARPED HIS SANITY.
THUS WAS VICTOR VON DOOM'S TRAGIC DESTINY IN THE WORLD YOU KNOW...

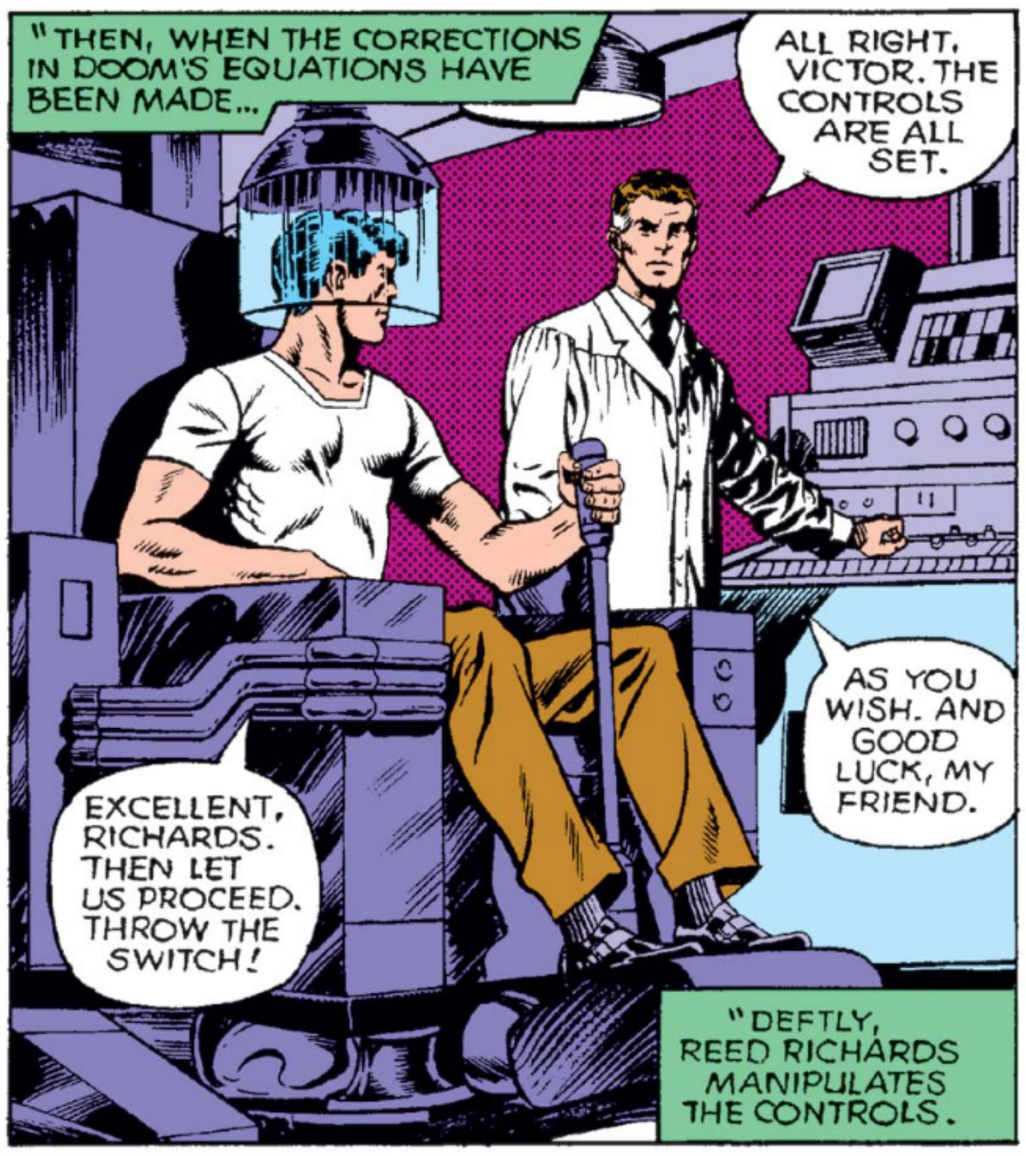

"YET, THERE ARE LIMITLESS ALTERNATE EARTHS WITHIN THE TAPESTRY OF REALITY, EACH ONE DIVERGING IN ITS HISTORY, PERHAPS SUBTLY... PERHAPS DRASTICALLY...
"... THEIR CONTINUUM STREAMS DIFFERING FROM THAT OF ONE ANOTHER AT CRITICAL MOMENTS.
"BEHOLD SUCH AN ALTERNATE EARTH, EXISTING IN THE SAME SPACE AS YOUR OWN--
"--WHERE A DIVERGENCE AT A CRITICAL POINT RESULTED IN A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT VICTOR VON DOOM.

"RETURN, THEN, TO A CRUCIAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF VON DOOM...
GIVE ME THAT! NOW GET OUT! DID YOU HEAR ME?? GET OUT!!

"AT THIS INSTANT, CURIOSITY--SUPRESSED IN YOUR REALITY-- FIGHTS ITS WAY TO THE FORE-FRONT OF DOOM'S MIND.
"HE CONSIDERS REED RICHARDS' OBSERVATION...
"... AND, IN THAT MOMENT, A WORLD DIVERGES FROM THE ONE WE KNOW.

YOU SAY THAT YOU HAVE EXAMINED MY EQUATIONS, THAT THEY ARE IN ERROR, RICHARDS?
BY A FEW DECIMALS. AND, GIVEN THE TYPE OF EXPERIMENT YOU'LL BE ATTEMPTING...
...THAT COULD PROVE TO BE DISASTER-OUS.
LISTEN, VON DOOM, I DON'T NECESSARILY APPROVE OF WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO HERE...

...BUT IT'S OBVIOUS YOU'RE GOING TO GO AHEAD WITH THIS EXPERIMENT OF YOURS.
I ASSUME YOU'LL BE NEEDING AN ASSISTANT, SO...
SO YOU WOULD VOLUNTEER FOR THAT POSITION RATHER THAN LET ME COURT DISASTER USING SOMEONE ELSE?
ALL RIGHT THEN RICHARDS--LET US GET TO WORK.



"BUT VICTOR VON DOOM DOES NOT HEAR THE WAVERING VOICE OF HIS COLLEAGUE...

"...THOUGH HE HEARS YET ANOTHER VOICE, THE BECKONING AND TORMENTED VOICE OF A WOMAN, AS HIS SPIRIT SOARS UN-BOUND, THROUGH A UNIVERSE OF MADNESS...

"... A VOICE WHICH, WHEN VON DOOM IDENTIFIES IT, PROMPTS HIS ASTRAL FORM TO SILENTLY SCREAM.

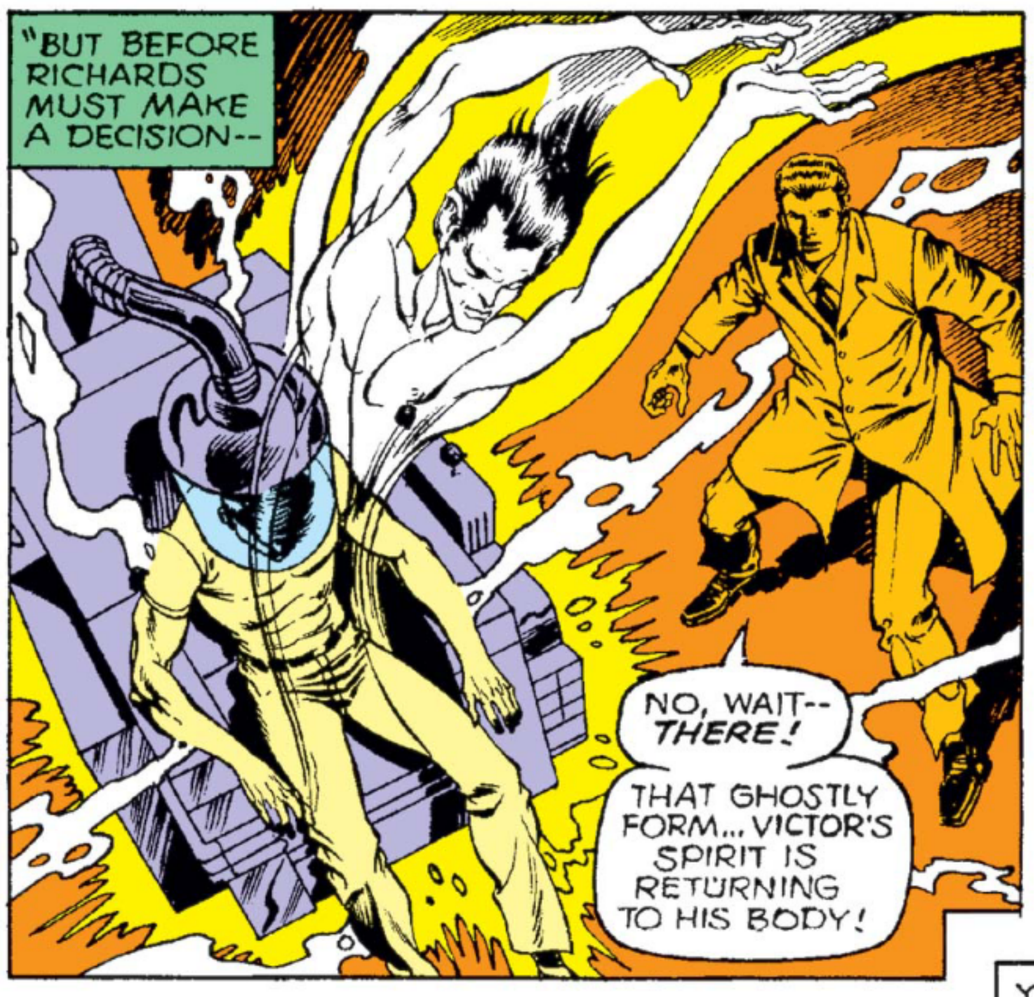
VICTOR

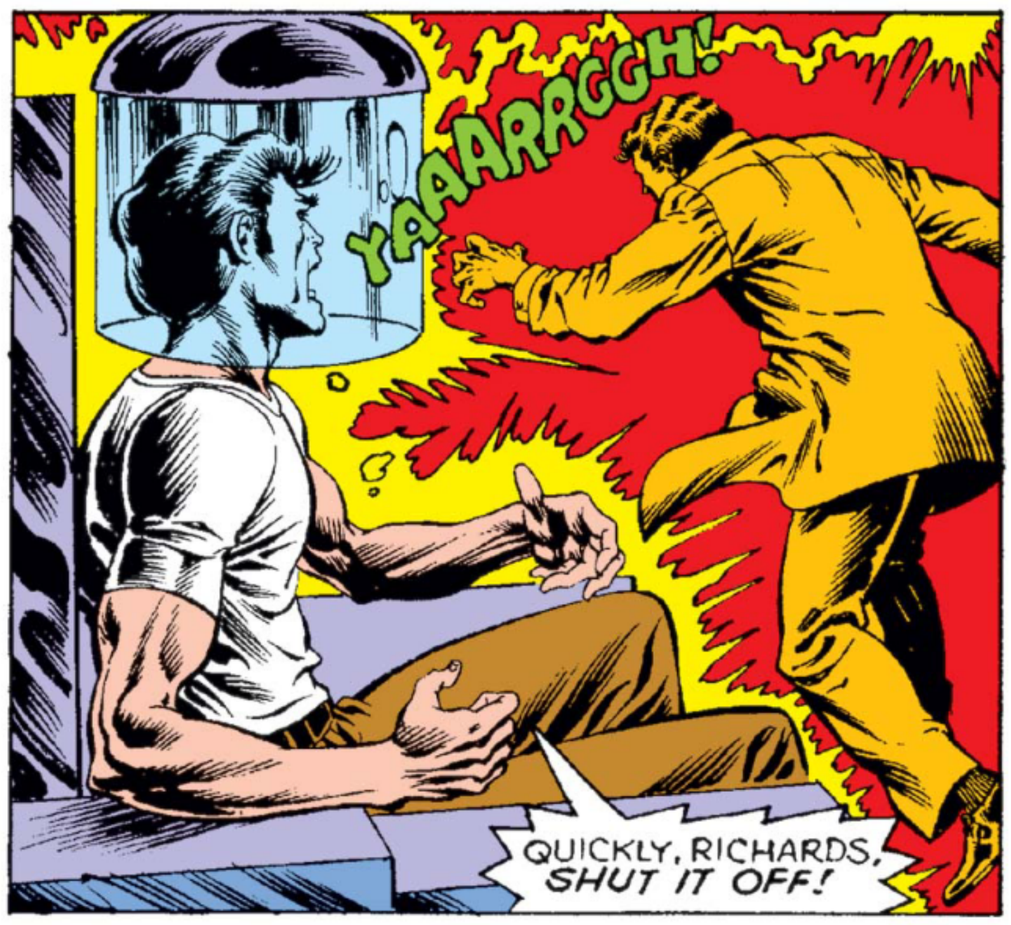
VICTOR

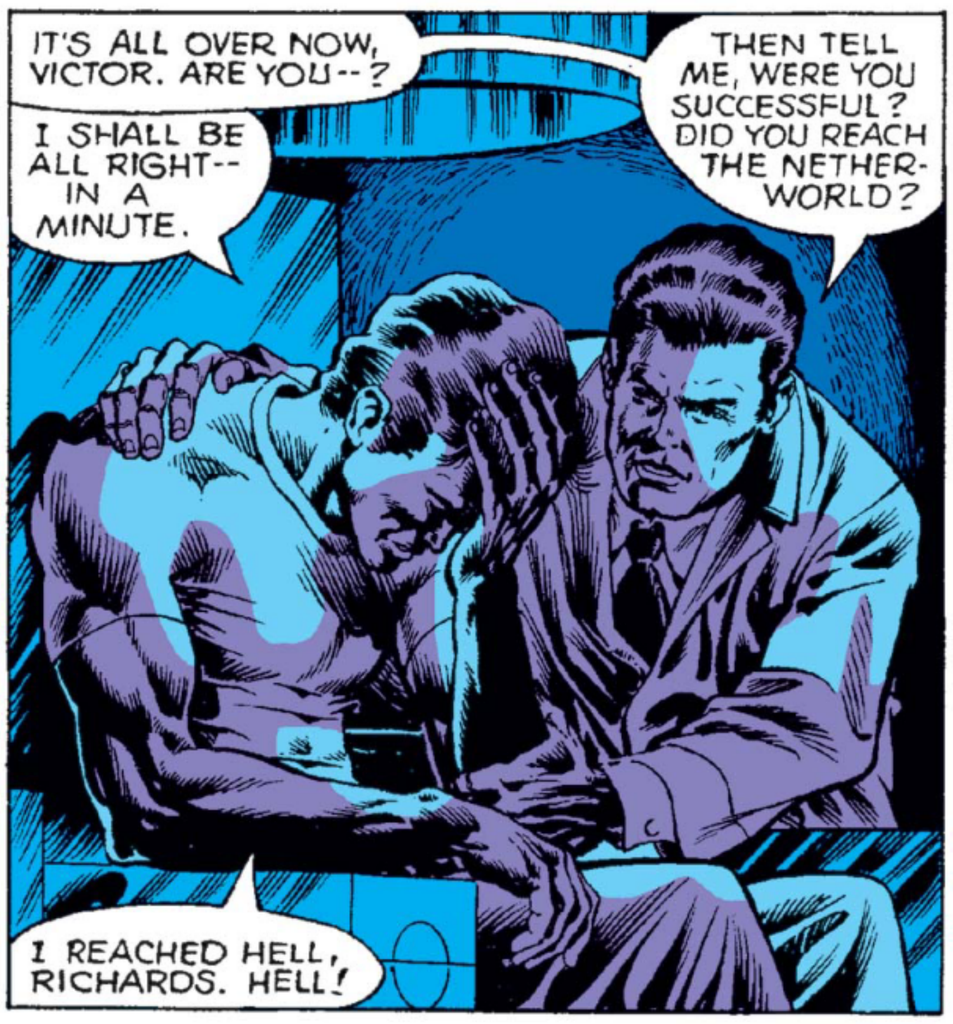
VICT

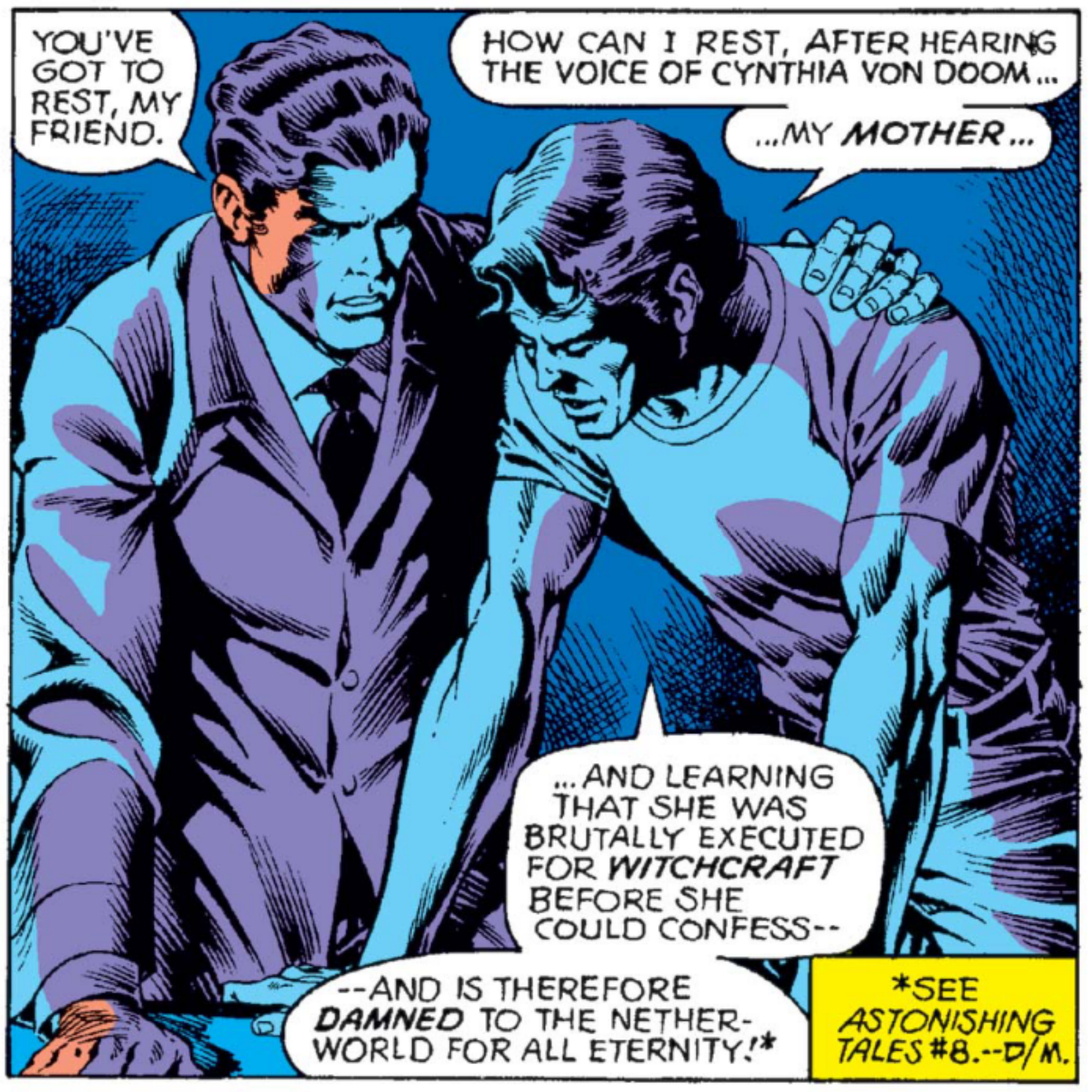
" WHILE BACK IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD...
GOOD LORD! WHAT'S HAPPENING TO HIM?!
HIS BODY'S VIBRATING-- LIKE IT'S READY TO SHAKE APART!

HE'S BEGINNING TO SMOKE --
I'VE GOT TO DO SOME-THING--
--BUT WHAT?! IF I SHUT OFF THE APPARATUS BEFORE HIS SPIRIT COMES BACK--


"BUT BEFORE RICHARDS MUST MAKE A DECISION--
NO, WAIT-- THERE!
THAT GHOSTLY FORM... VICTOR'S SPIRIT IS RETURNING TO HIS BODY!

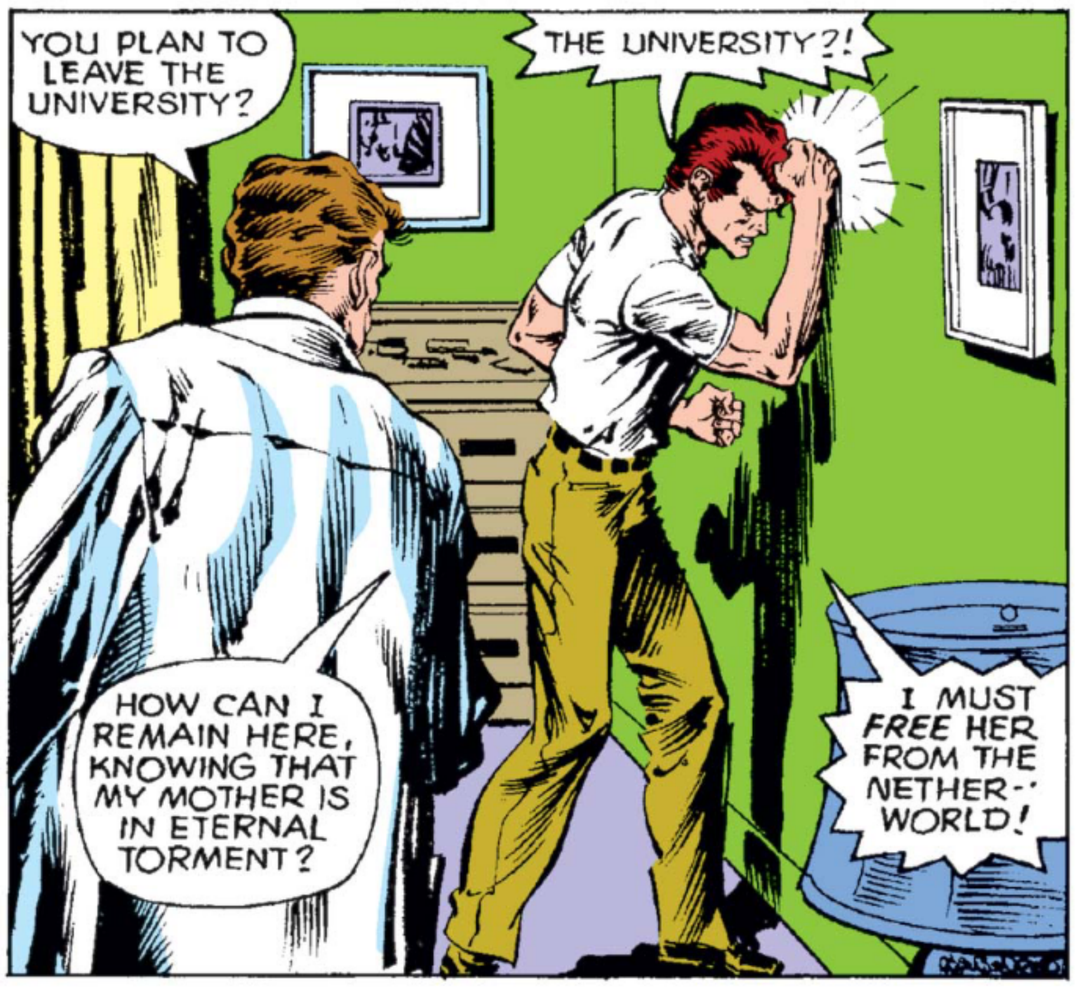

YAAARRGGH!
QUICKLY, RICHARDS, SHUT IT OFF!


IT'S ALL OVER NOW, VICTOR. ARE YOU--?
I SHALL BE ALL RIGHT-- IN A MINUTE.
THEN TELL ME, WERE YOU SUCCESSFUL? DID YOU REACH THE NETHER-WORLD?
I REACHED HELL, RICHARDS. HELL!

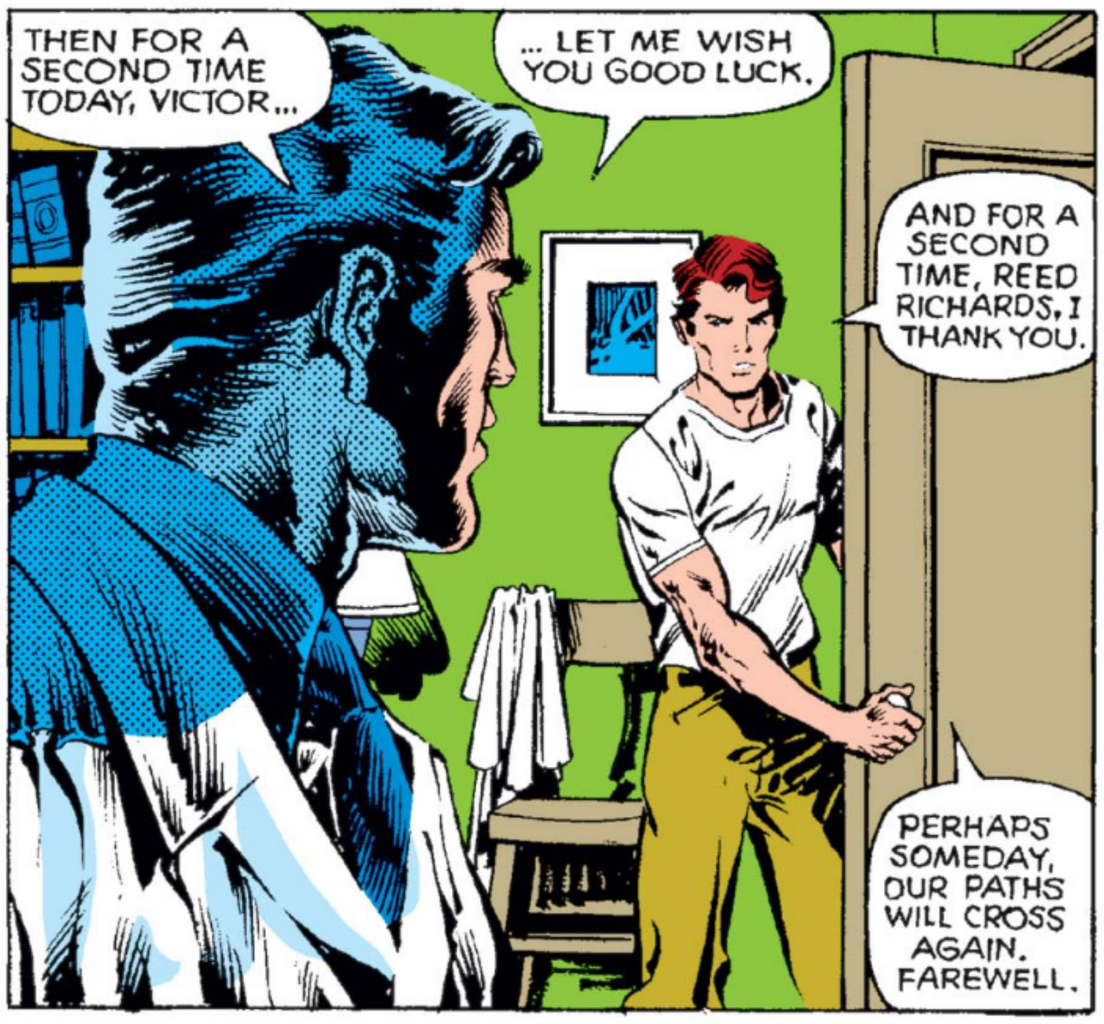

YOU'VE GOT TO REST, MY FRIEND.
HOW CAN I REST, AFTER HEARING THE VOICE OF CYNTHIA VON DOOM...
...MY MOTHER...
...AND LEARNING THAT SHE WAS BRUTALLY EXECUTED FOR WITCHCRAFT BEFORE SHE COULD CONFESS--
--AND IS THEREFORE DAMNED TO THE NETHER-WORLD FOR ALL ETERNITY!*
*SEE ASTONISHING TALES #8.--D/M.

VICTOR, I'M... SORRY.
THERE IS NO NEED TO FEEL SORROW FOR ME, RICHARDS.
FOR MY MOTHER'S VOICE TOLD ME SOMETHING MORE...
THAT I AM THE RIGHTFUL HEIR TO THE THRONE OF LATVERIA.

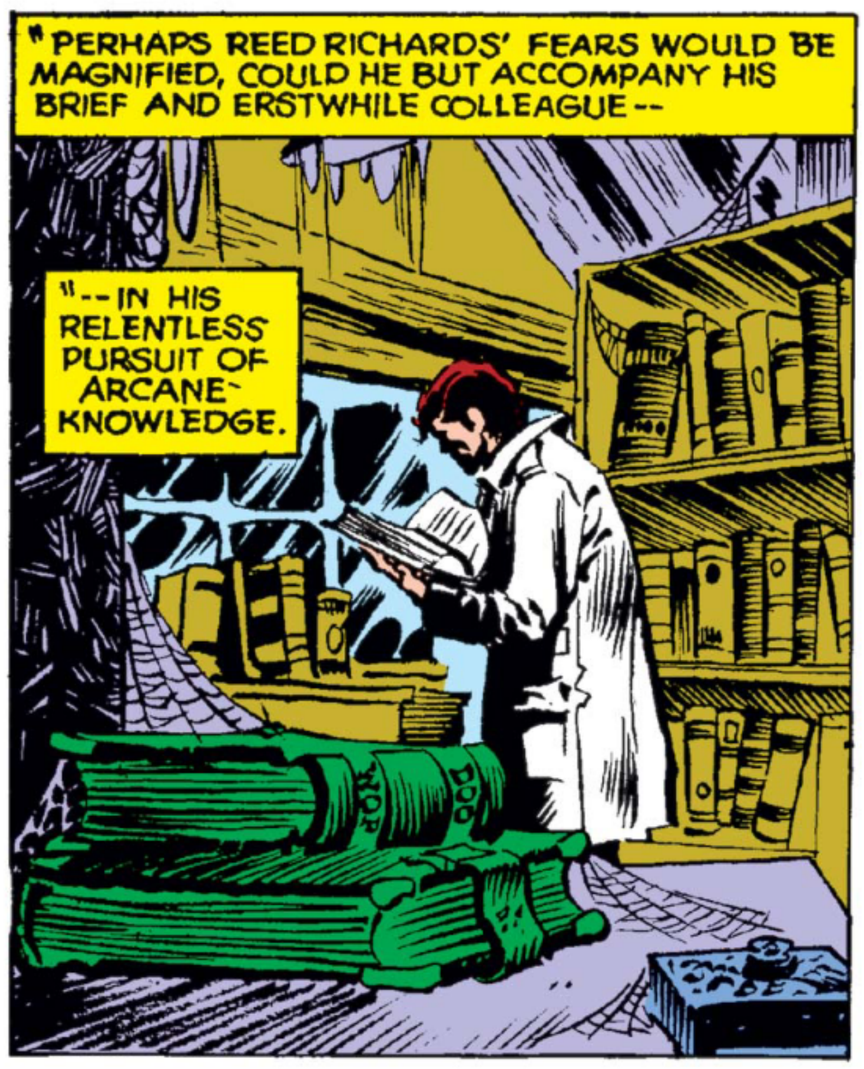
I THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE, REED RICHARDS.
WHO KNOWS WHAT TRAGEDY MAY HAVE OCCURRED HAD I PROCEEDED WITH MY EXPERIMENT UNAIDED?
BUT NOW, I FEAR WE MUST PART COMPANY...
...FOR THERE IS MUCH THAT VICTOR VON DOOM MUST ACCOMPLISH.

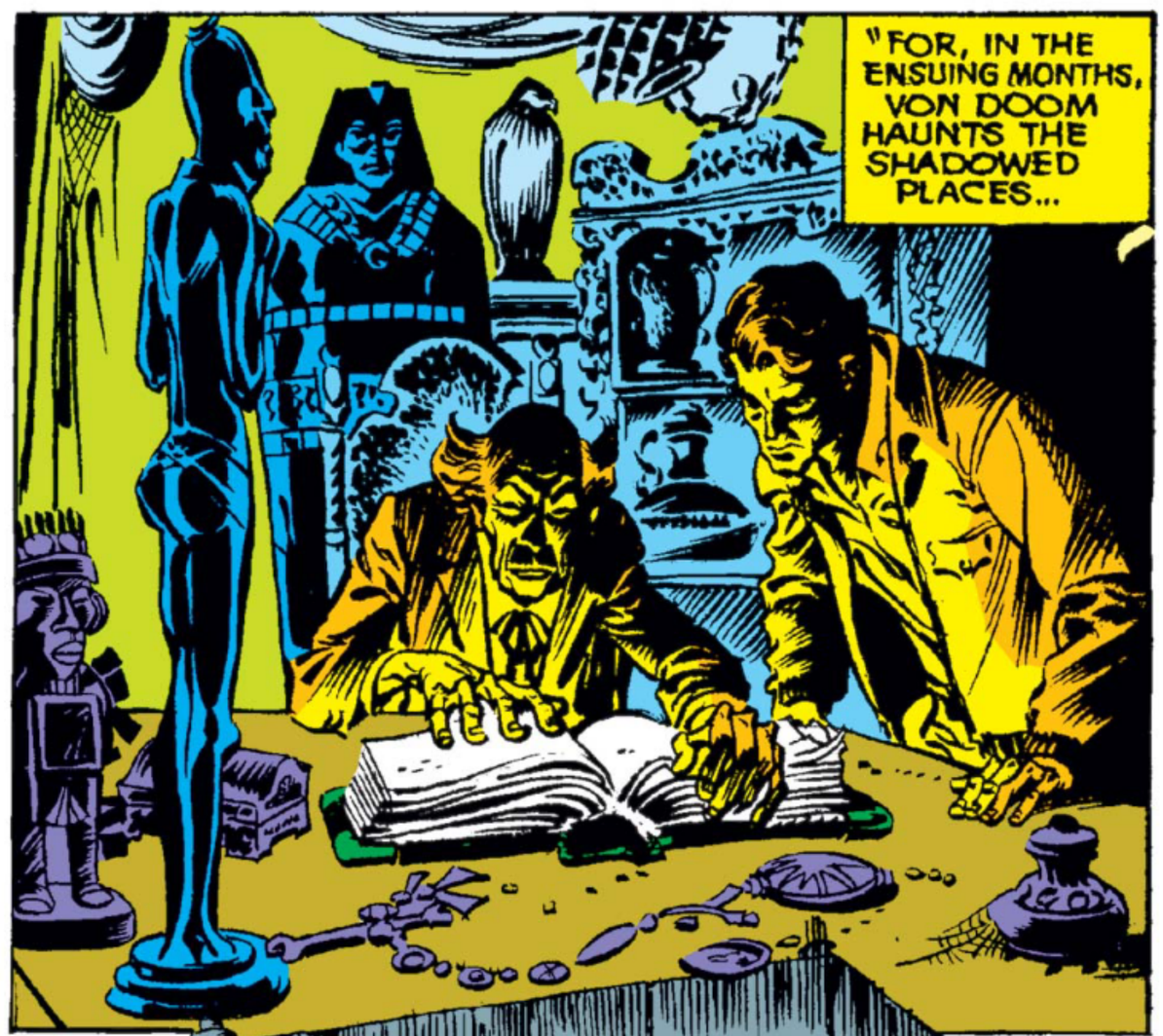

YOU PLAN TO LEAVE THE UNIVERSITY?
THE UNIVERSITY?!
HOW CAN I REMAIN HERE, KNOWING THAT MY MOTHER IS IN ETERNAL TORMENT?
I MUST FREE HER FROM THE NETHER-WORLD!

AND ONCE THAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, I SHALL CLAIM MY RIGHTFUL LATVERIAN THRONE...
...AND BECOME THE LEADER, BENEFACTOR AND CHAMPION OF MY PEOPLE.
THIS SWEARS VICTOR VON DOOM!


THEN FOR A SECOND TIME TODAY, VICTOR...
...LET ME WISH YOU GOOD LUCK.
AND FOR A SECOND TIME, REED RICHARDS, I THANK YOU.
PERHAPS SOMEDAY, OUR PATHS WILL CROSS AGAIN. FAREWELL.

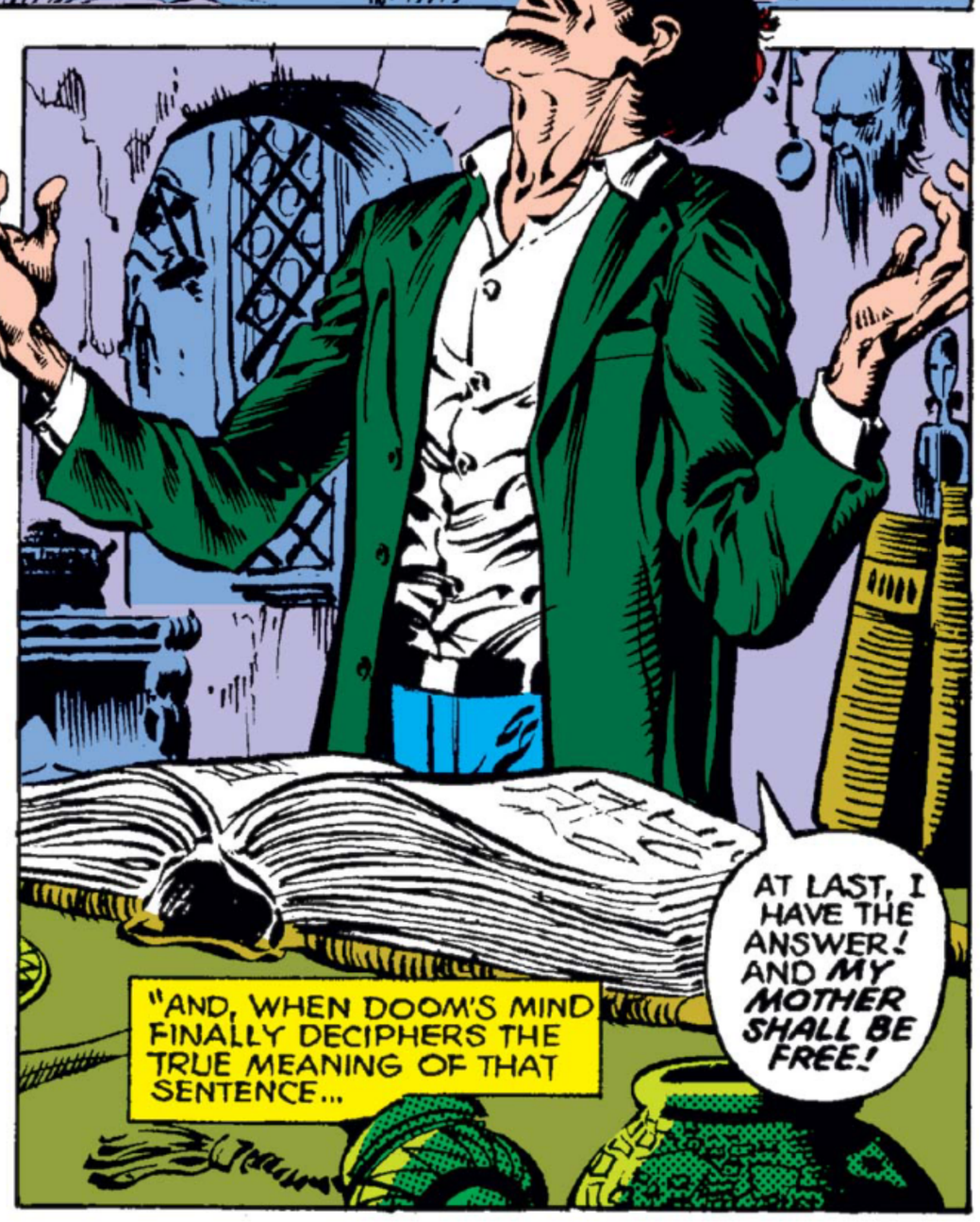
YES, FAREWELL, VICTOR VON DOOM...
THOUGH I CAN'T SHRUG OFF THE FEELING...
CLICK!
...THAT TRAGEDY WILL FOLLOW YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, NO MATTER HOW NOBLE THEY MAY BE.

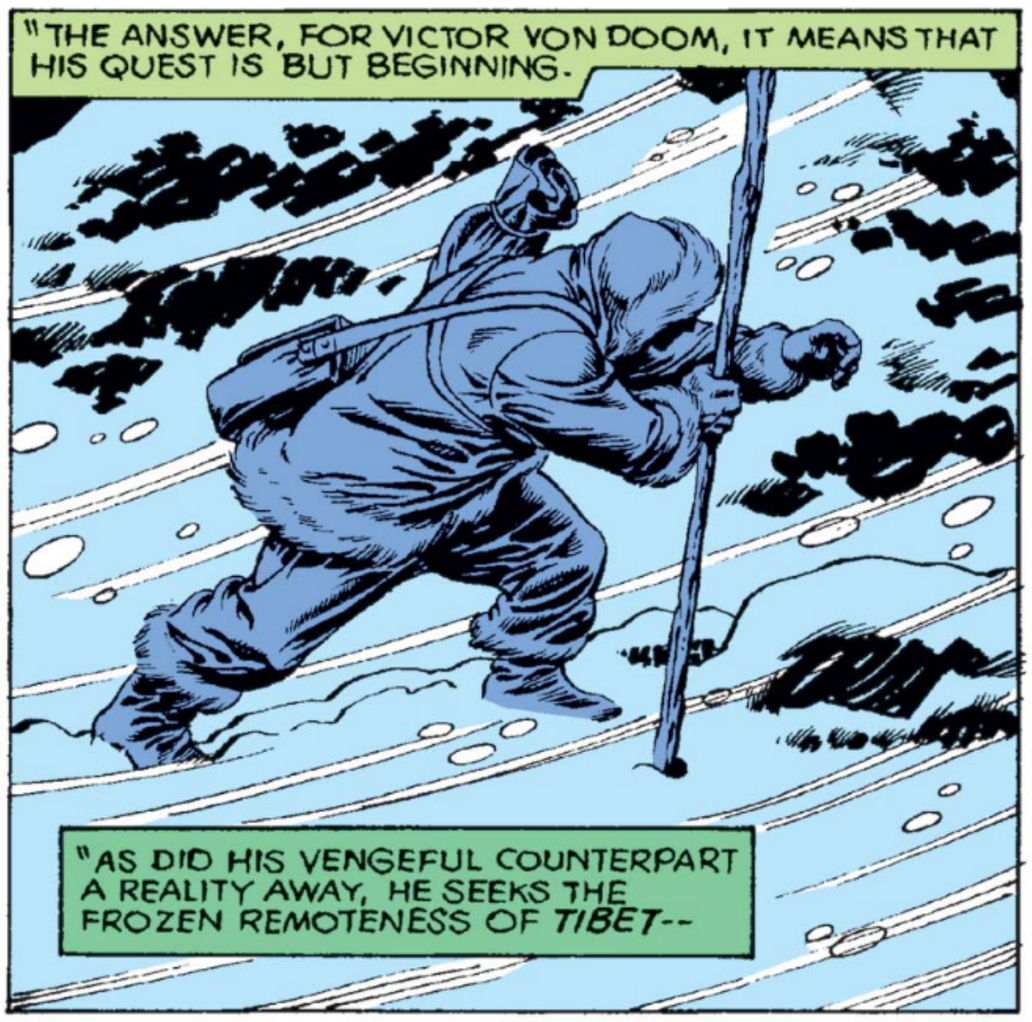

"PERHAPS REED RICHARDS' FEARS WOULD BE MAGNIFIED, COULD HE BUT ACCOMPANY HIS BRIEF AND ERSTWHILE COLLEAGUE--
"--IN HIS RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF ARCANE KNOWLEDGE.

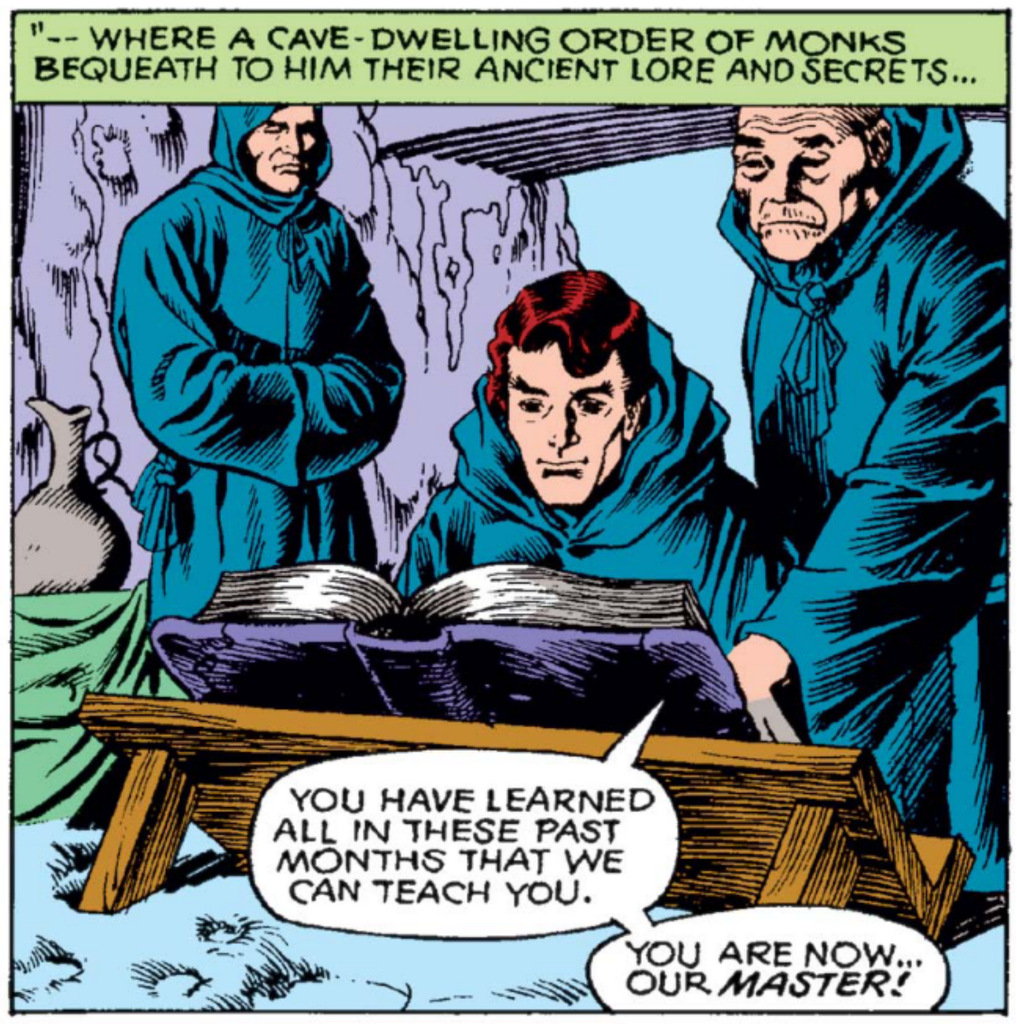

"FOR, IN THE ENSUING MONTHS, VON DOOM HAUNTS THE SHADOWED PLACES...

"... SEEKING OUT THE YELLOWED PAGES OF FORBIDDEN VOLUMES, DECIPHERING THEIR PRECIOUSLY-GUARDED SECRETS...
"... FOLLOWING THEIR DEEPLY CODED INSTRUCTIONS...
"... EVEN TO PROFANING THE VERY TOMBS IN QUEST OF THE TRUTH.

"THEN, AT LAST, THE LONG SEARCH SEEMINGLY ENDS...
"... AS VON DOOM'S ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE LEADS HIM TO A SINGLE, HAND-SCRAWLED LINE.

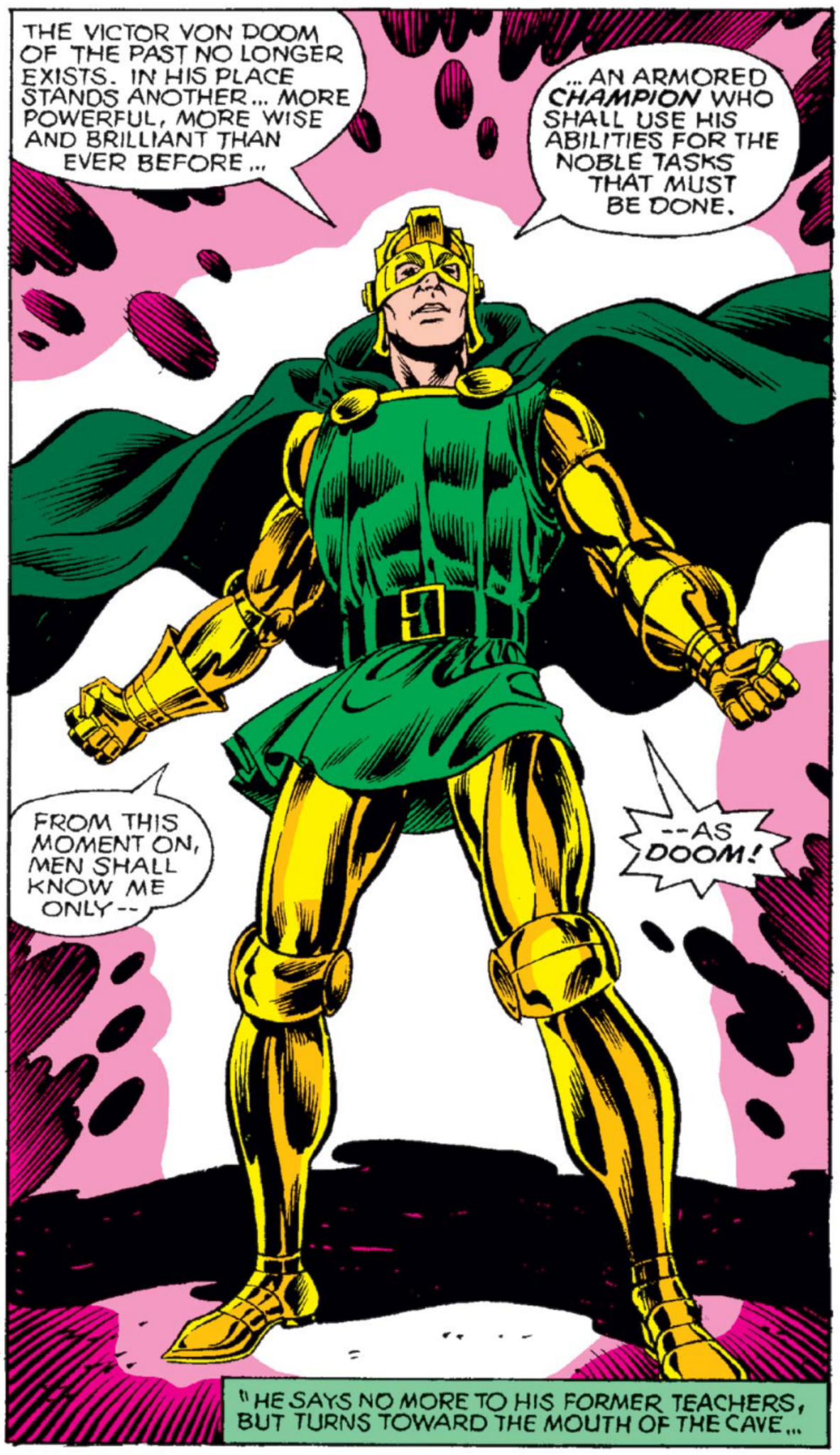

"AND, WHEN DOOM'S MIND FINALLY DECIPHERS THE TRUE MEANING OF THAT SENTENCE...
AT LAST, I HAVE THE ANSWER! AND MY MOTHER SHALL BE FREE!


"THE ANSWER, FOR VICTOR VON DOOM, IT MEANS THAT HIS QUEST IS BUT BEGINNING.
"AS DID HIS VENGEFUL COUNTERPART A REALITY AWAY, HE SEEKS THE FROZEN REMOTENESS OF TIBET--

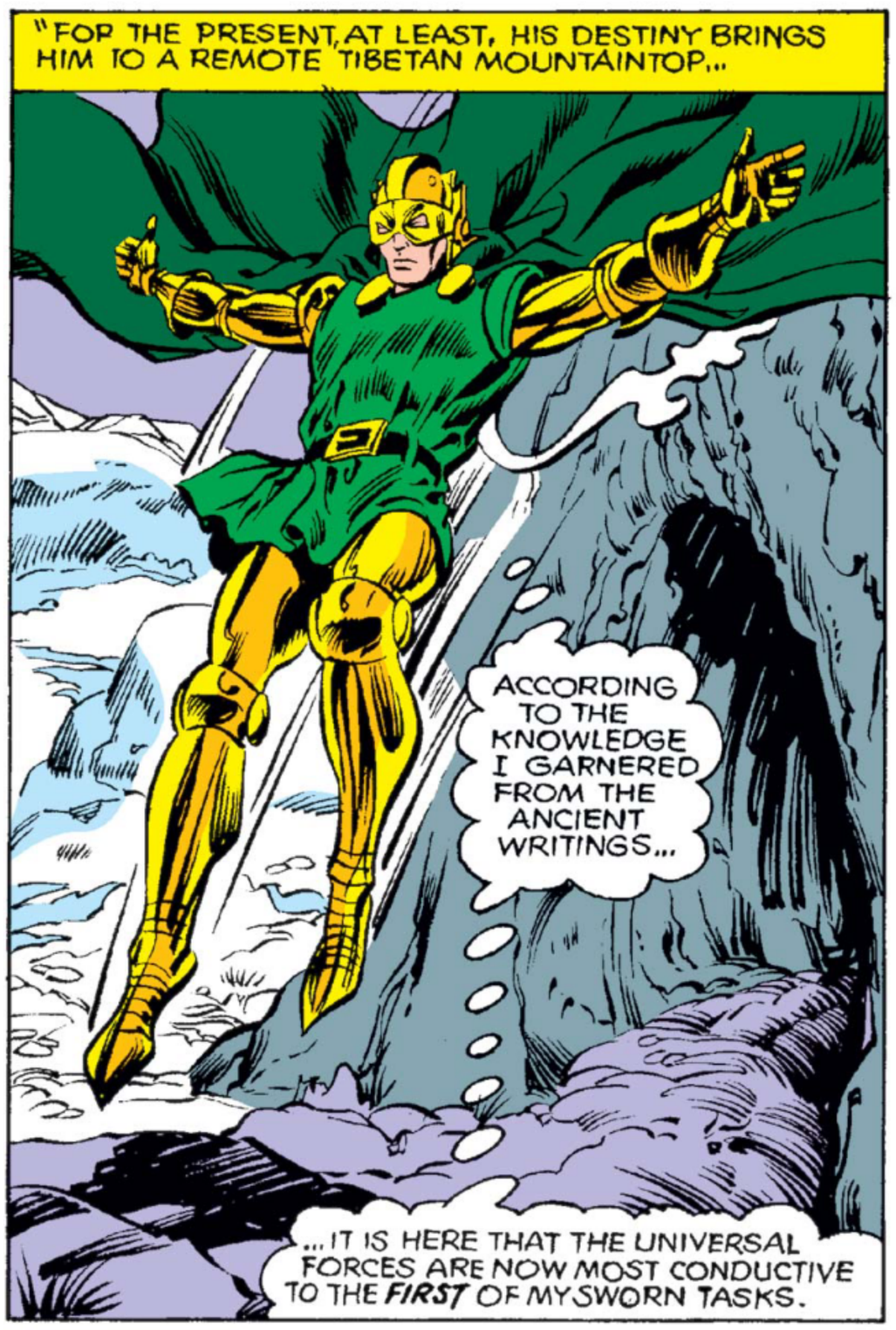

"-- WHERE A CAVE-DWELLING ORDER OF MONKS BEQUEATH TO HIM THEIR ANCIENT LORE AND SECRETS...
YOU HAVE LEARNED ALL IN THESE PAST MONTHS THAT WE CAN TEACH YOU.
YOU ARE NOW... OUR MASTER!

"AND...
I HOPE THAT THE ARMOR WE FORGED FOR YOU MEETS YOUR NEEDS, MASTER.
IT CONTAINS ALL OF THE DEVICES WHICH YOU DESIGNED.

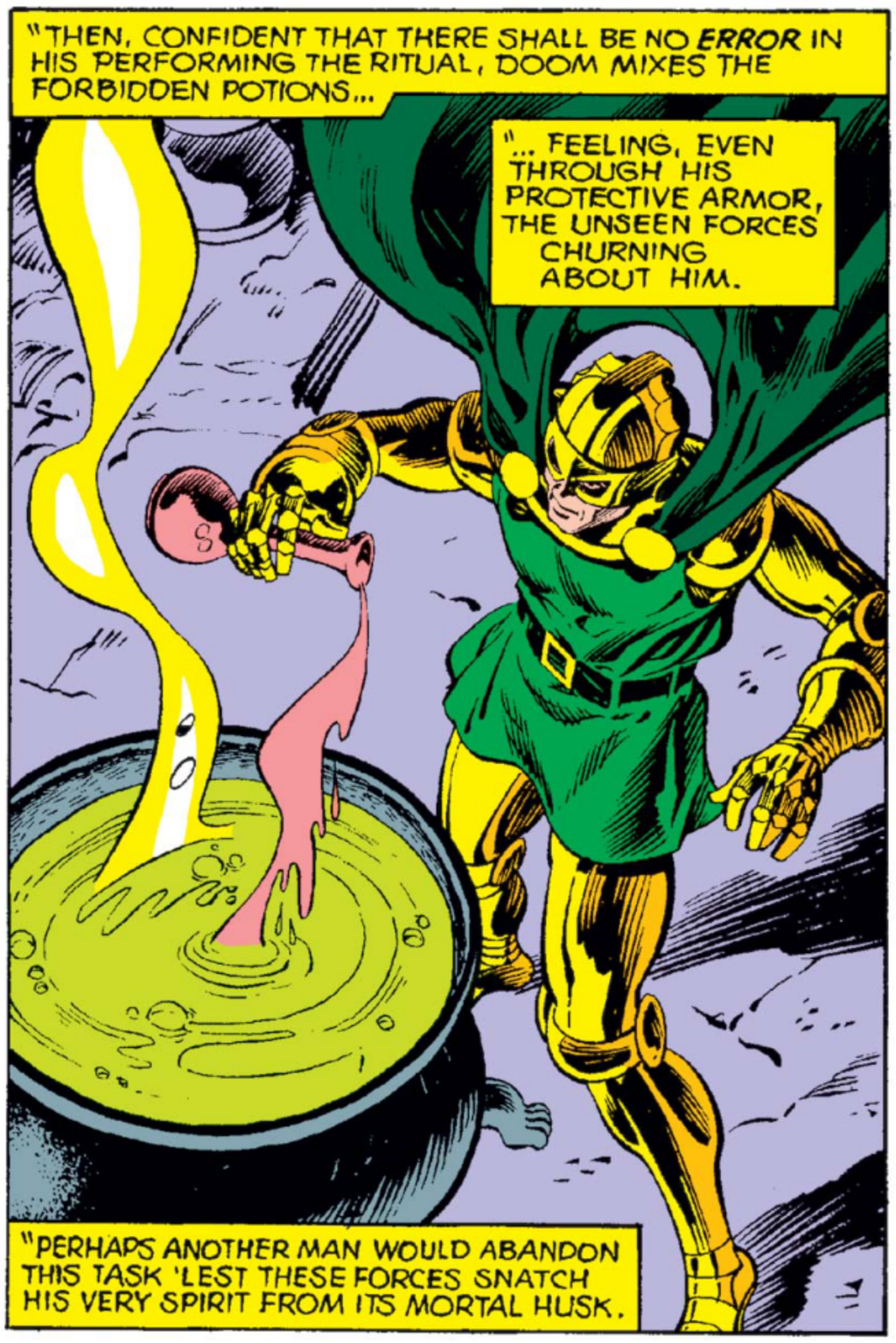
AND FINALLY, YOUR HELMET.
A HELMET BEFITTING A NOBLE KNIGHT OF OLD.
AND THUS SHOULD IT TRULY BE, MY BROTHERS.
FOR IT IS A KNIGHT OF SORTS THAT I HAVE NOW BECOME.

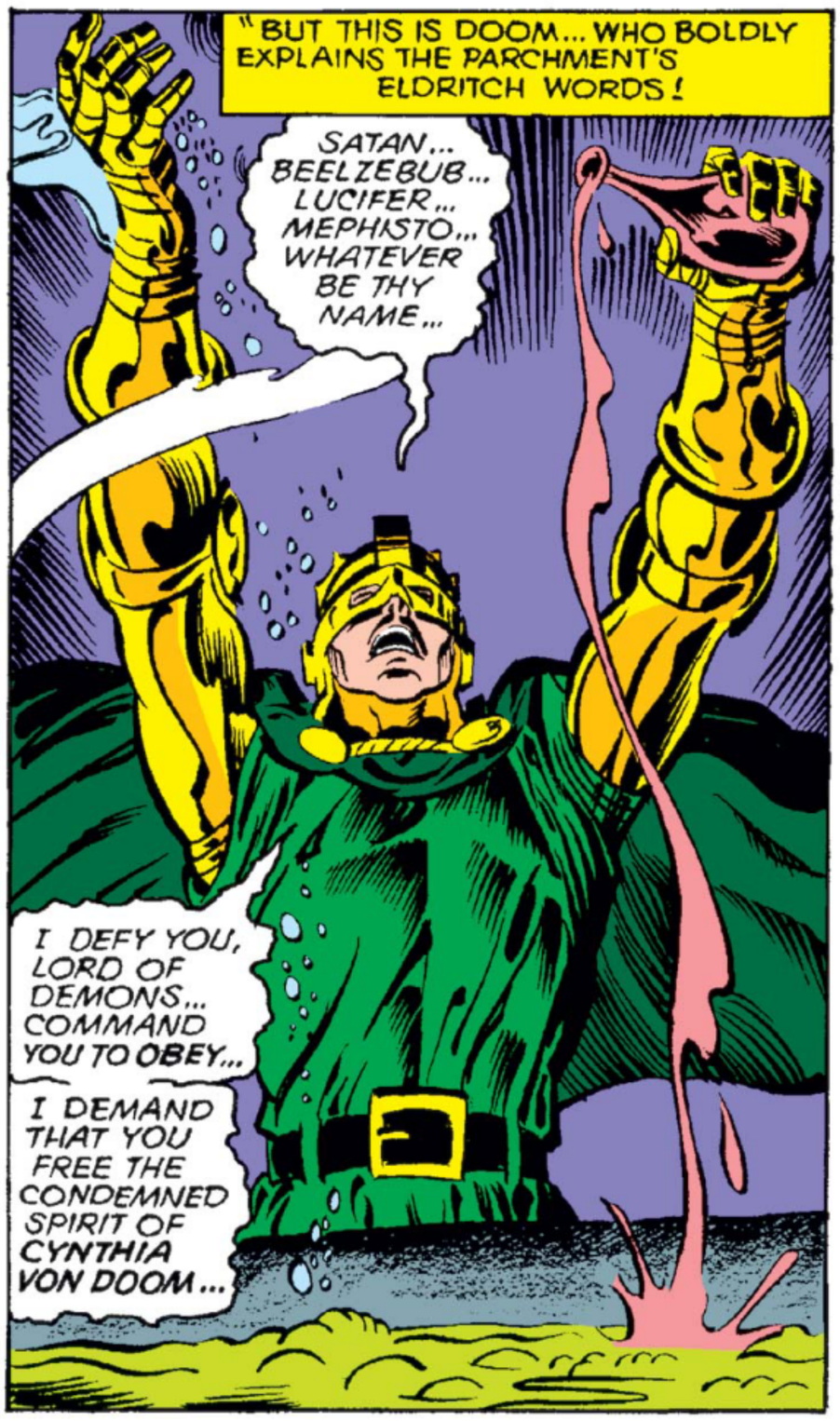

THE VICTOR VON DOOM OF THE PAST NO LONGER EXISTS. IN HIS PLACE STANDS ANOTHER... MORE POWERFUL, MORE WISE AND BRILLIANT THAN EVER BEFORE...
... AN ARMORED CHAMPION WHO SHALL USE HIS ABILITIES FOR THE NOBLE TASKS THAT MUST BE DONE.
FROM THIS MOMENT ON, MEN SHALL KNOW ME ONLY--
--AS DOOM!
"HE SAYS NO MORE TO HIS FORMER TEACHERS, BUT TURNS TOWARD THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE...

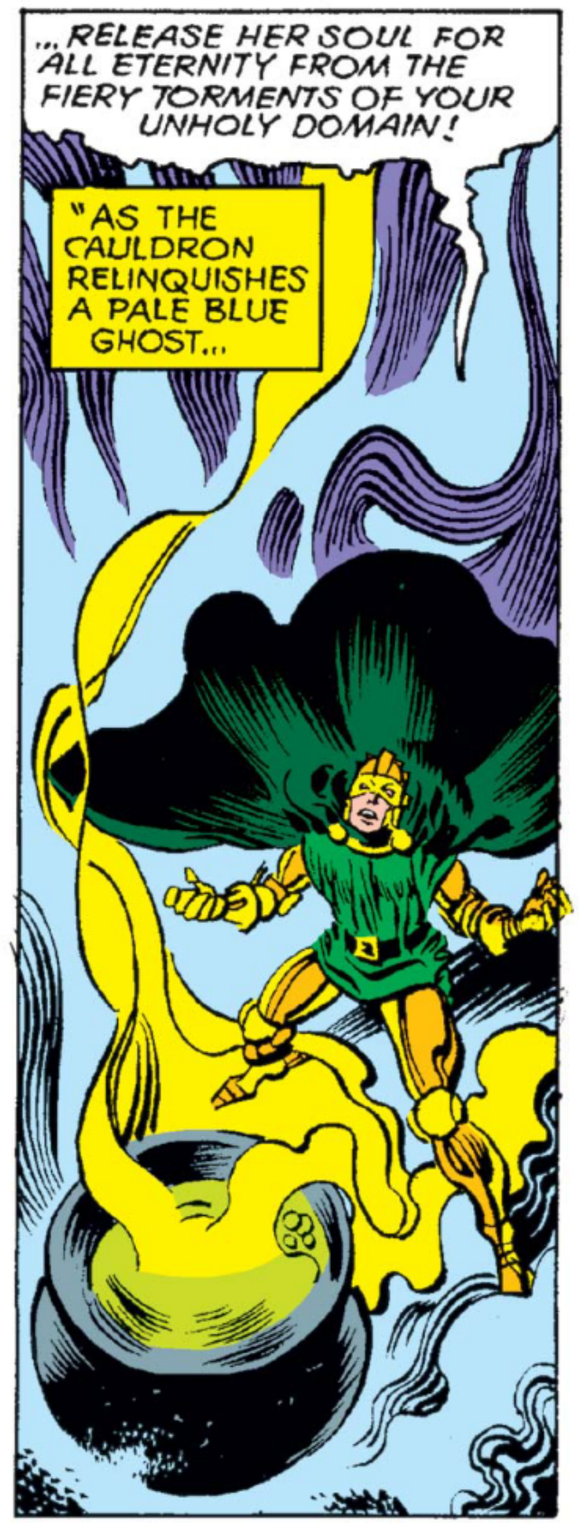
"... AND SWITCHES ON HIS ARMOR'S NUCLEAR-POWERED FLYING HARNESS...
THE MASTER LEAVES US. WILL HE EVER RETURN?
WHO CAN TRULY SAY? FOR DOOM MUST PURSUE HIS DESTINY-- WHEREVER THAT MAY LEAD.


"FOR THE PRESENT, AT LEAST, HIS DESTINY BRINGS HIM TO A REMOTE TIBETAN MOUNTAINTOP...
ACCORDING TO THE KNOWLEDGE I GARNERED FROM THE ANCIENT WRITINGS...
...IT IS HERE THAT THE UNIVERSAL FORCES ARE NOW MOST CONDUCTIVE TO THE *FIRST* OF MY SWORN TASKS.

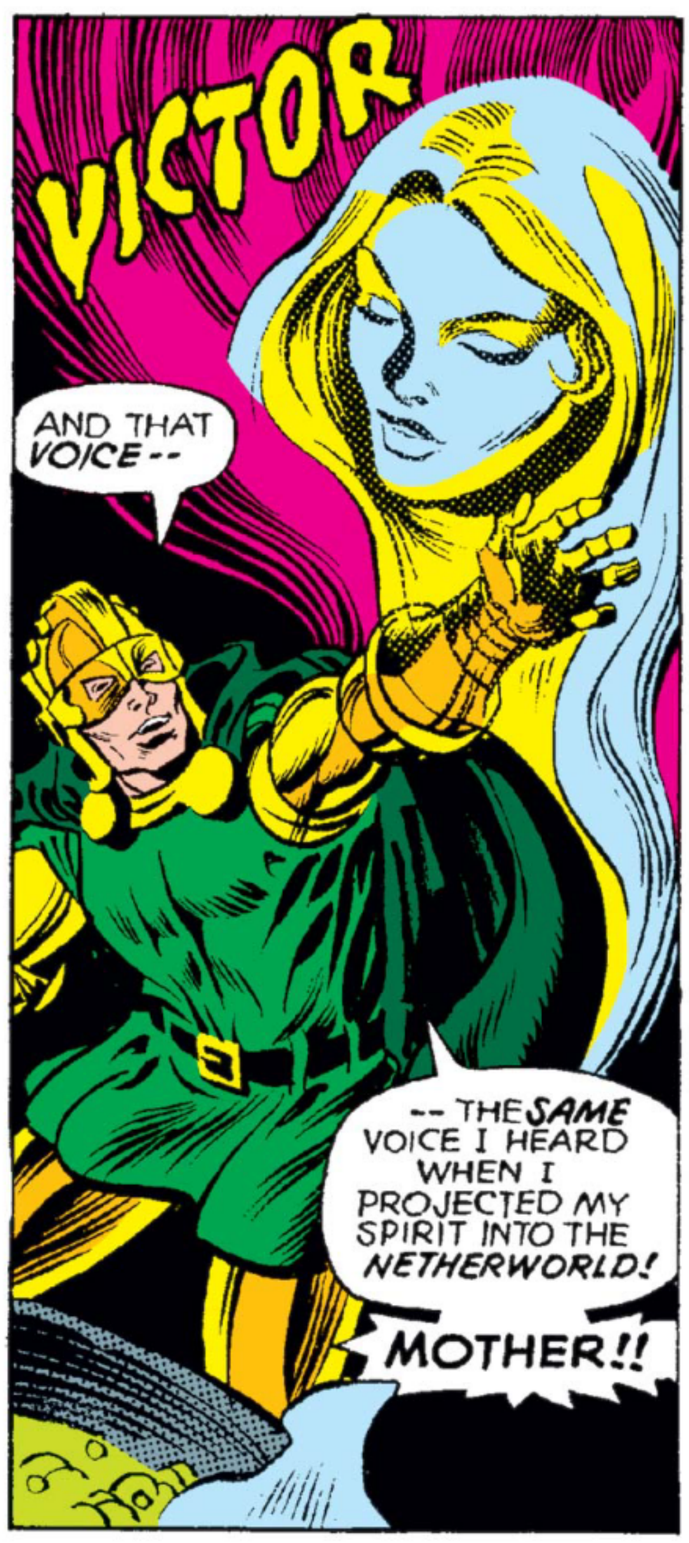
"LATER, IN AN UNINHABITED CAVE...
I MUST PERFORM THE AGE-OLD RITUAL QUICKLY, BEFORE THE UNIVERSAL FORCES SHIFT--
--AND I AM FORCED TO DO WHAT I MUST ELSEWHERE.
"FOR A FINAL TIME, HIS EYES PERUSE THE MYSTIC SCRIPT...


"THEN, CONFIDENT THAT THERE SHALL BE NO *ERROR* IN HIS PERFORMING THE RITUAL, DOOM MIXES THE FORBIDDEN POTIONS...
"... FEELING, EVEN THROUGH HIS PROTECTIVE ARMOR, THE UNSEEN FORCES CHURNING ABOUT HIM.
"PERHAPS ANOTHER MAN WOULD ABANDON THIS TASK 'LEST THESE FORCES SNATCH HIS VERY SPIRIT FROM ITS MORTAL HUSK.

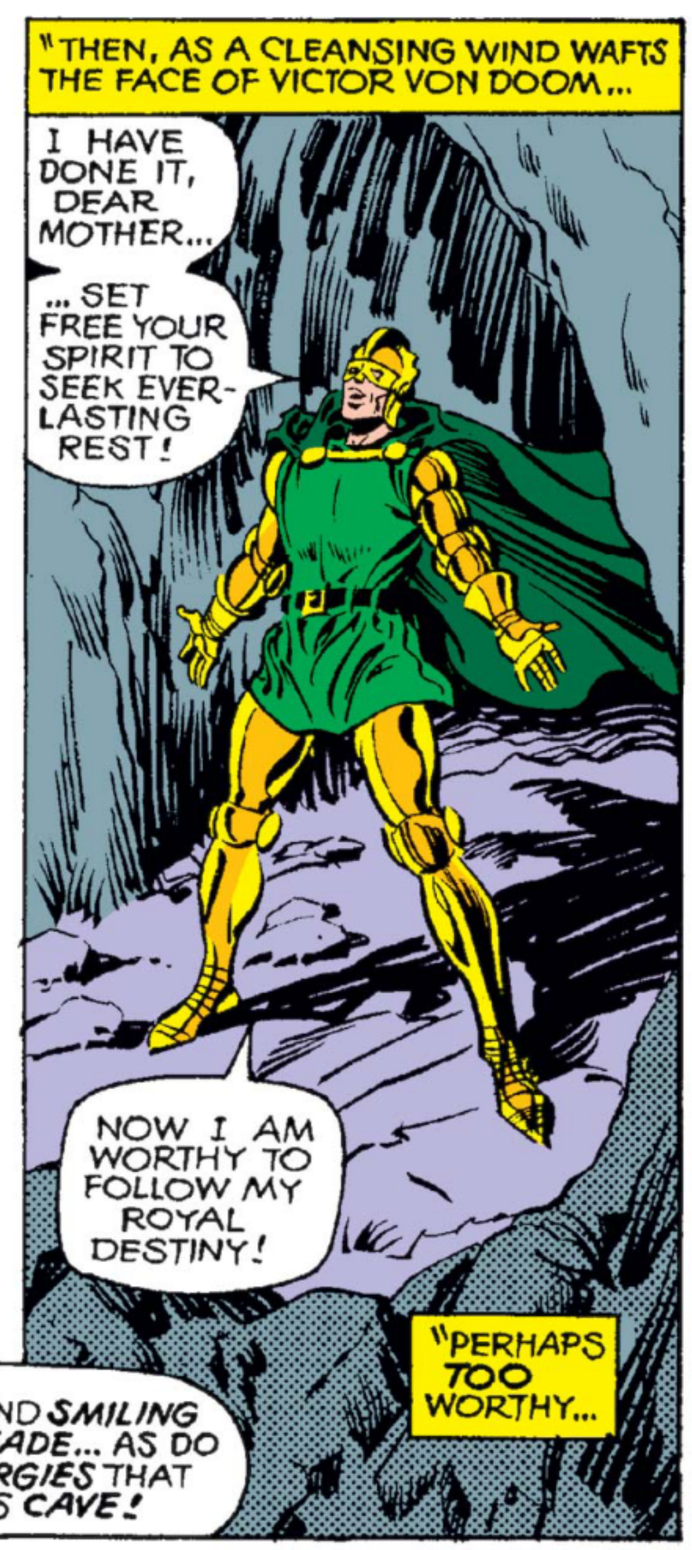

"BUT THIS IS DOOM... WHO BOLDLY EXPLAINS THE PARCHMENT'S ELDRITCH WORDS!
SATAN... BEELZEBUB... LUCIFER... MEPHISTO... WHATEVER BE THY NAME...
I DEFY YOU, LORD OF DEMONS... COMMAND YOU TO OBEY...
I DEMAND THAT YOU FREE THE CONDEMNED SPIRIT OF CYNTHIA VON DOOM...

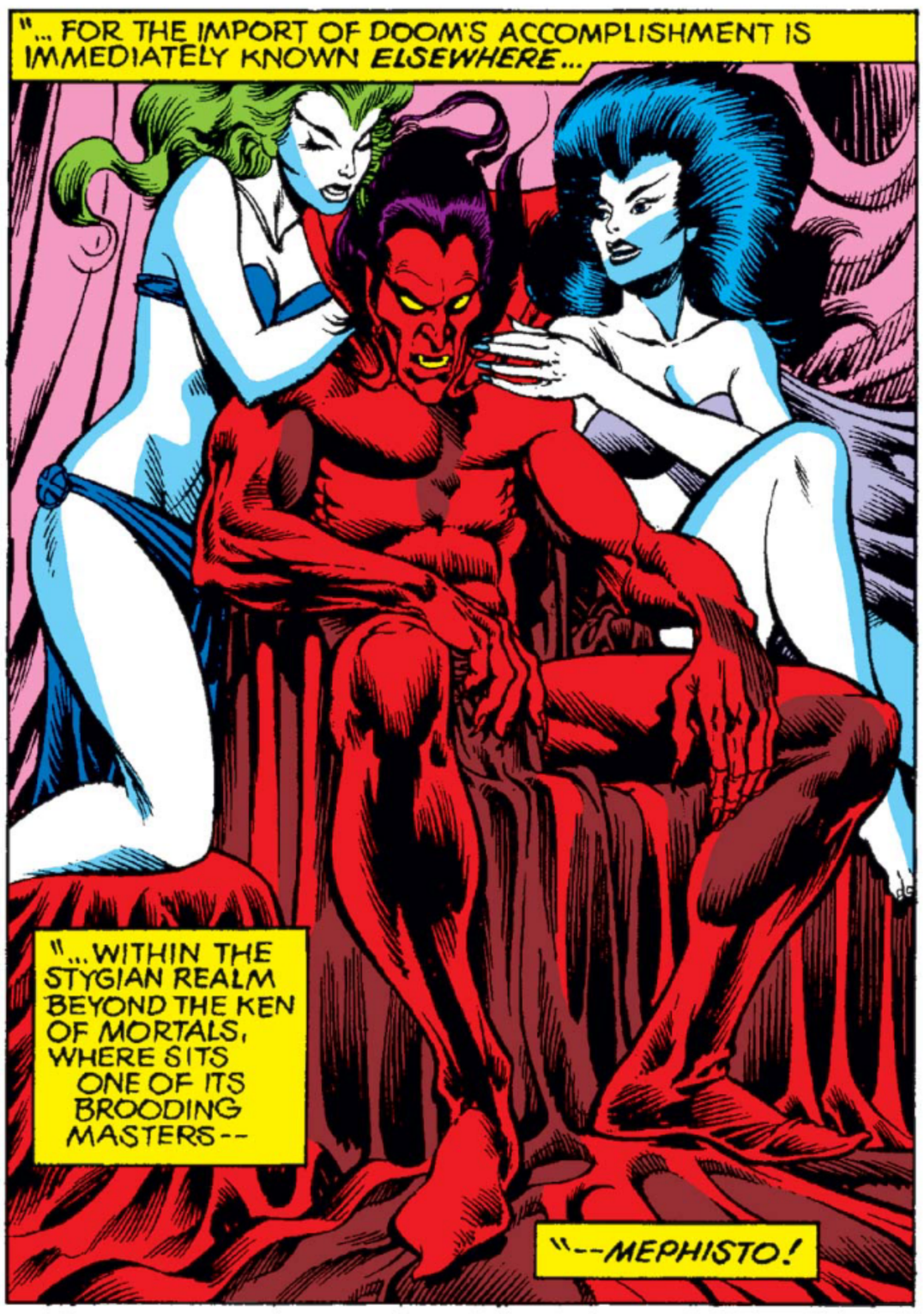

...RELEASE HER SOUL FOR ALL ETERNITY FROM THE FIERY TORMENTS OF YOUR UNHOLY DOMAIN!
"AS THE CAULDRON RELINQUISHES A PALE BLUE GHOST...

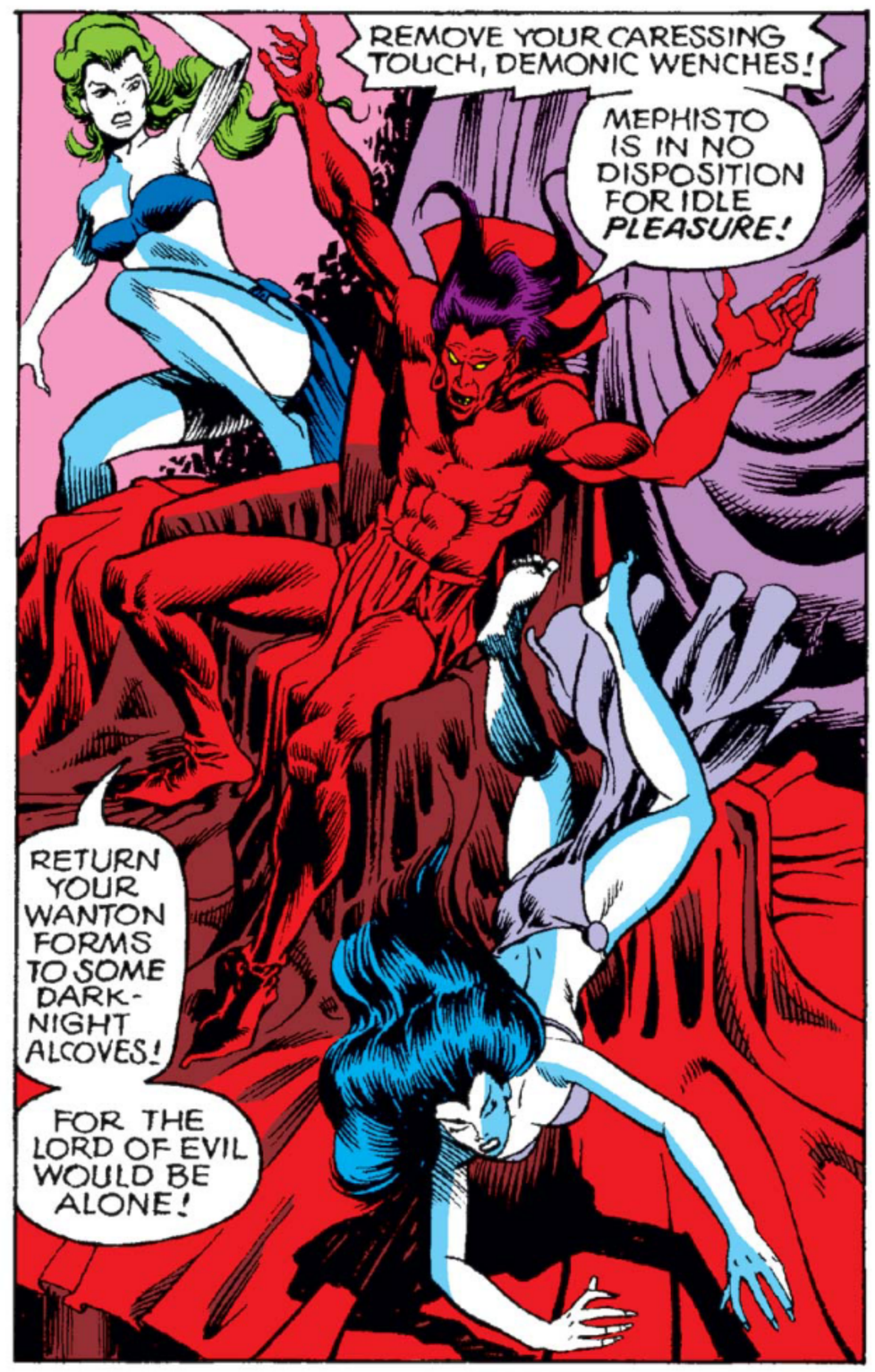
"... DOOM WONDERS IF THE TWISTING IMAGES NOW FORMING BEFORE HIS VISORED EYES--
"--HERALD SOME HELLISH DEMON COME TO PUNISH HIM.
NO!
IT IS A WOMAN'S FACE!


VICTOR
AND THAT VOICE--
--THE SAME VOICE I HEARD WHEN I PROJECTED MY SPIRIT INTO THE NETHERWORLD!
MOTHER!!

VICTOR...
BUT GONE IS THE TERROR FROM HER VOICE... GONE IS THE ANGUISHED SOUND OF ONE IN IMMORTAL TORMENT!
NOW HER VOICE AND SMILING VISAGE QUICKLY FADE... AS DO THE DEMONIC ENERGIES THAT HAD INVADED THIS CAVE!

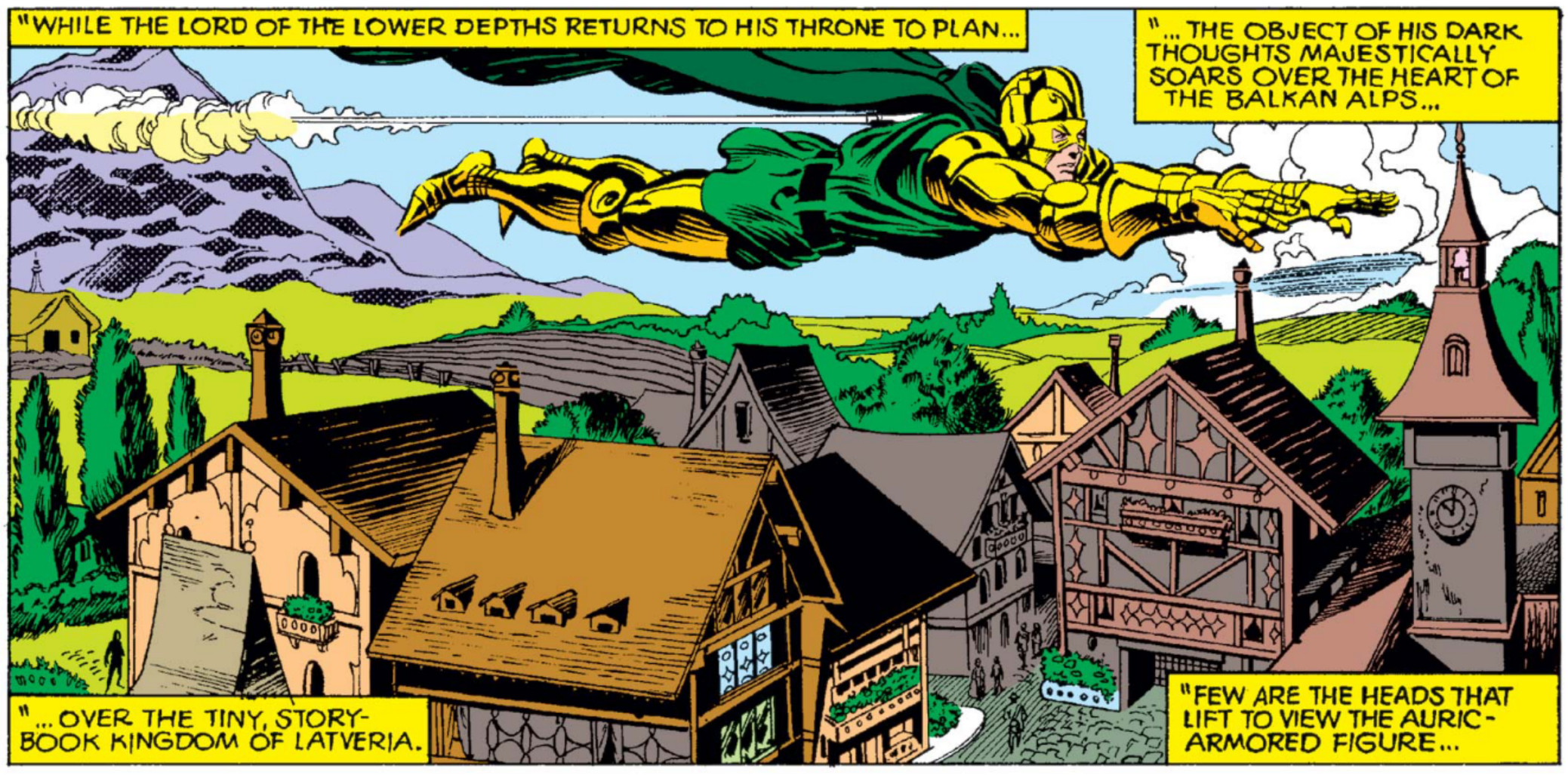

"THEN, AS A CLEANSING WIND WAFTS THE FACE OF VICTOR VON DOOM...
I HAVE DONE IT, DEAR MOTHER...
... SET FREE YOUR SPIRIT TO SEEK EVER-LASTING REST!
NOW I AM WORTHY TO FOLLOW MY ROYAL DESTINY!
"PERHAPS TOO WORTHY...

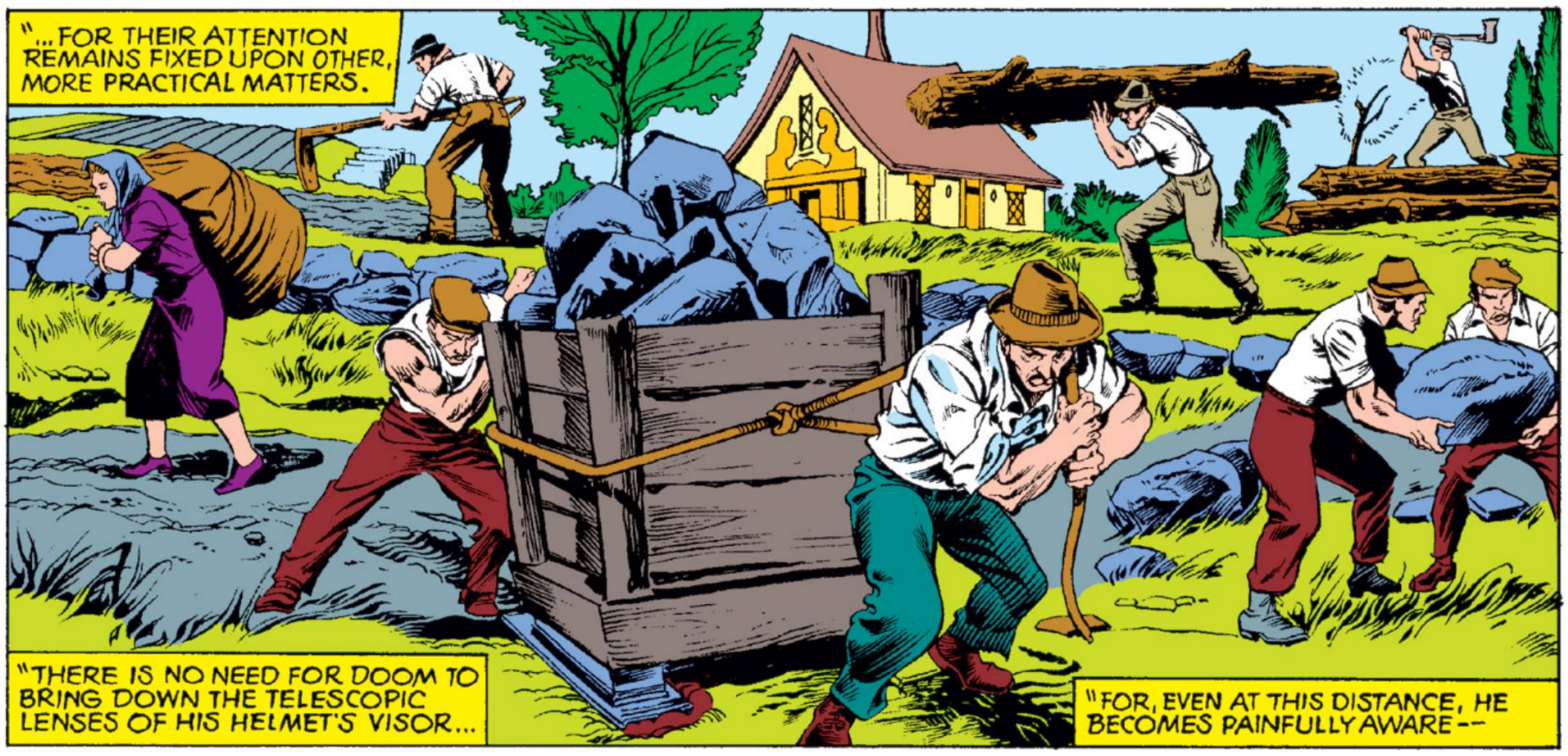

"... FOR THE IMPORT OF DOOM'S ACCOMPLISHMENT IS IMMEDIATELY KNOWN ELSEWHERE...
"...WITHIN THE STYGIAN REALM BEYOND THE KEN OF MORTALS, WHERE SITS ONE OF ITS BROODING MASTERS--
"--MEPHISTO!

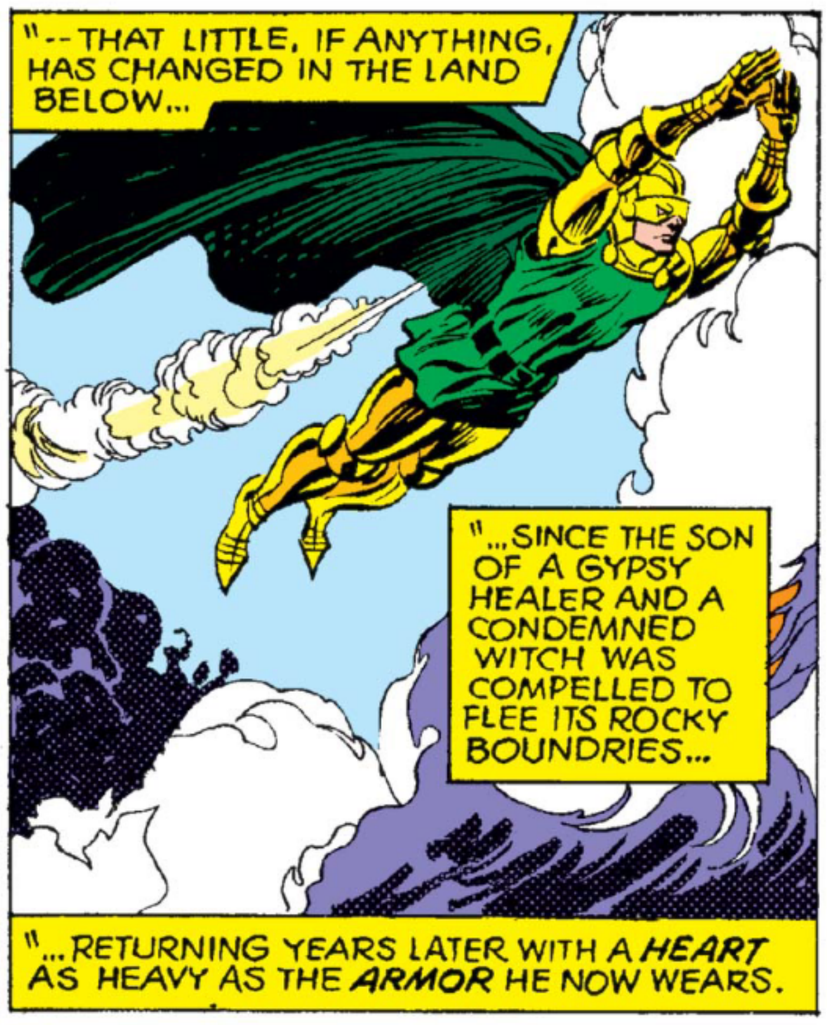

REMOVE YOUR CARESSING TOUCH, DEMONIC WENCHES!
MEPHISTO IS IN NO DISPOSITION FOR IDLE PLEASURE!
RETURN YOUR WANTON FORMS TO SOME DARK-NIGHT ALCOVES!
FOR THE LORD OF EVIL WOULD BE ALONE!

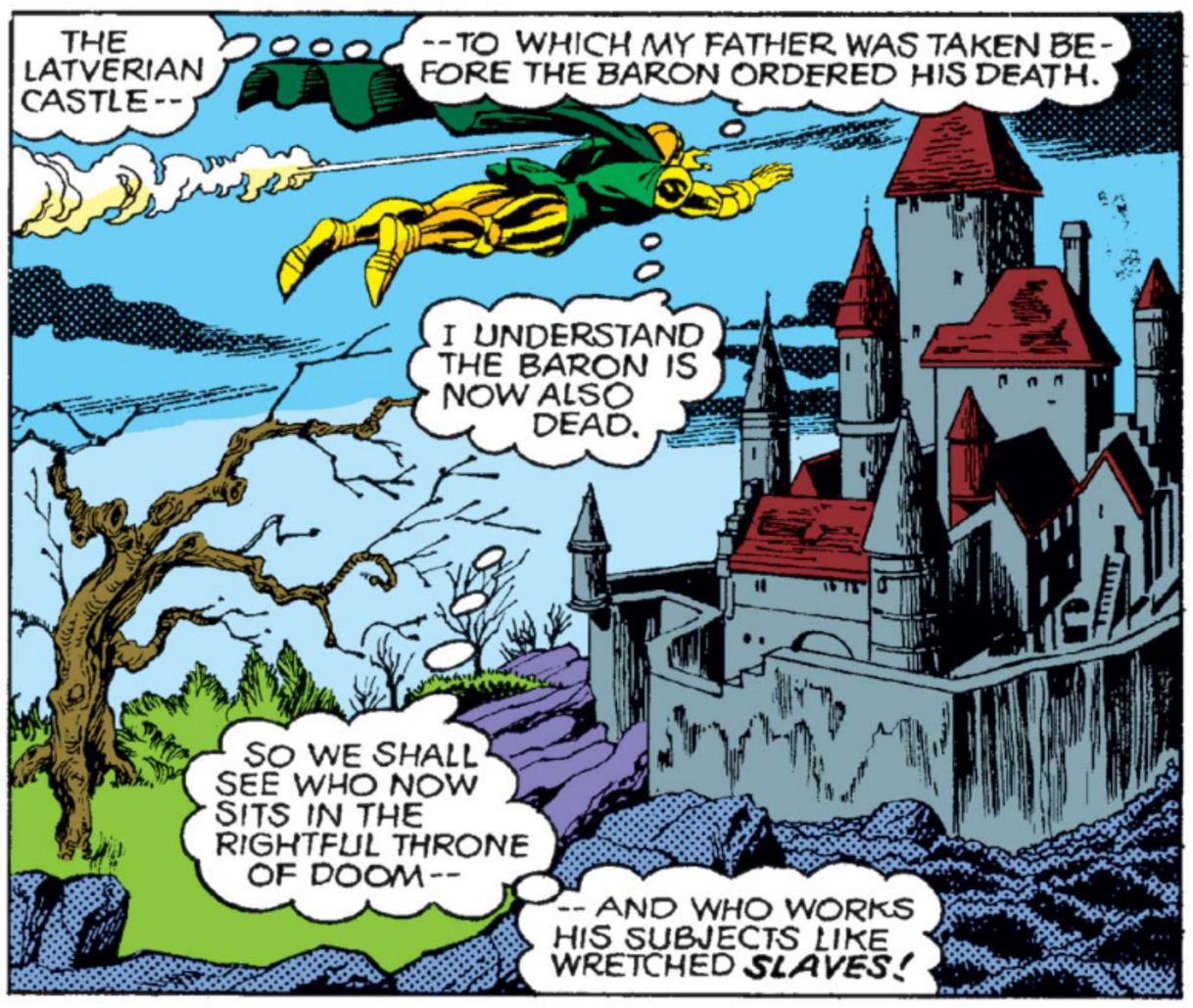
"THEN, AFTER THE COMELY DEMONS HAVE SCAMPERED AWAY...
THAT WHICH I ALWAYS THOUGHT IMPOSSIBLE HAS OCCURRED:
A SOUL HAS BEEN SNATCHED FROM MY RANKS OF THE DAMNED...
... FREED BY AN EARTHLY MORTAL WHOSE POWER, I SENSE, RIVALS THAT OF THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS HIMSELF!

LET MY HELL-SPAWNED FLAMES REVEAL TO ME THE IDENTITY OF THIS BLASPHEMER!
Ah, I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED!
ONLY VICTOR VON DOOM COULD ACCOMPLISH SO MONUMENTAL A FEAT!
BUT DOOM SHALL PAY FOR WHAT HE HAS DARED TO DO!
AND IT WILL BE THE VERY TRAGIC FLAW I SENSE WITHIN HIS MORTAL SPIRIT--
--WHICH SHALL BRING HIM CRASHING TO HIS DOWNFALL!

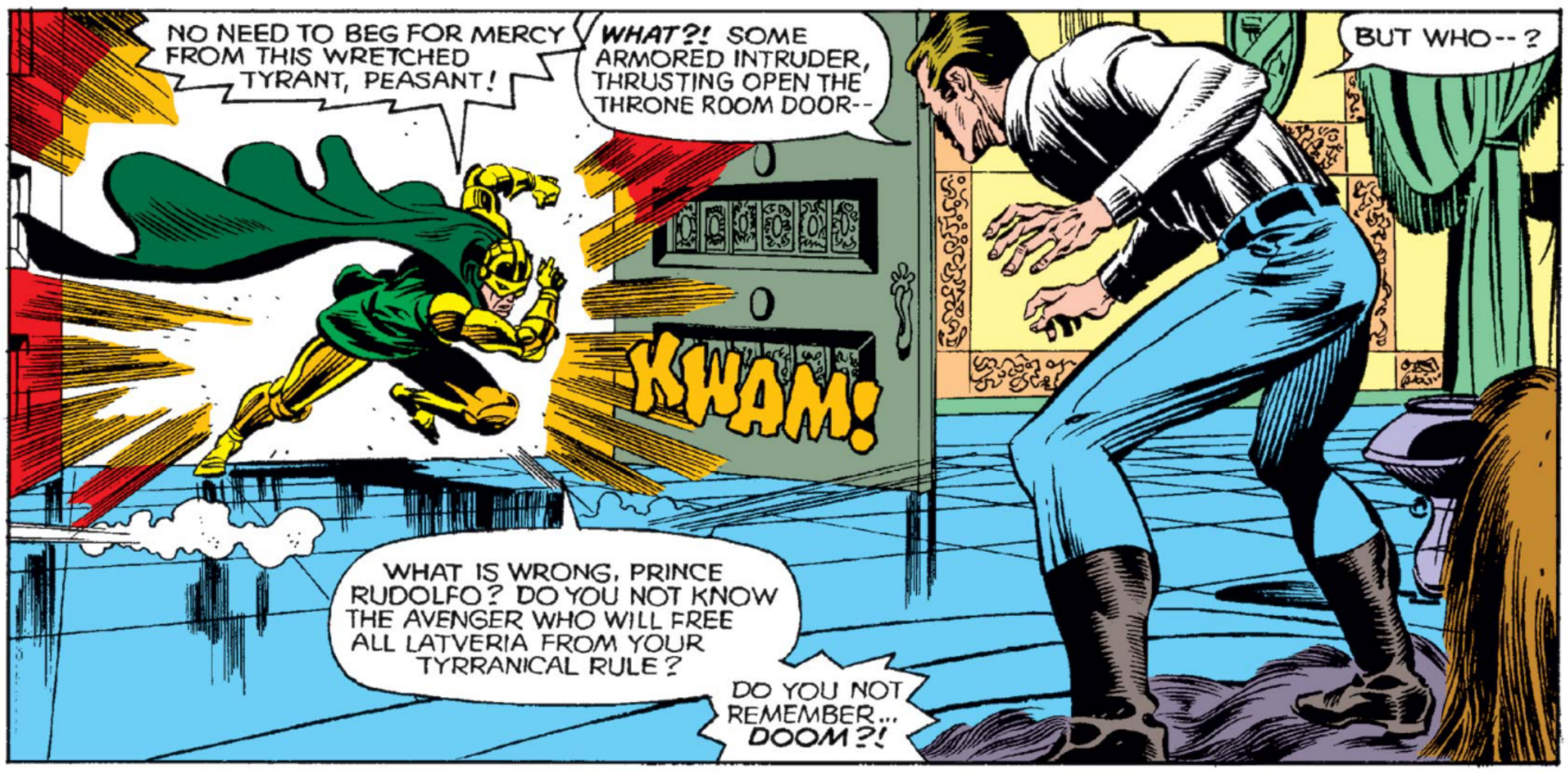

"WHILE THE LORD OF THE LOWER DEPTHS RETURNS TO HIS THRONE TO PLAN...
"... THE OBJECT OF HIS DARK THOUGHTS MAJESTICALLY SOARS OVER THE HEART OF THE BALKAN ALPS...
"... OVER THE TINY, STORY-BOOK KINGDOM OF LATVERIA.
"FEW ARE THE HEADS THAT LIFT TO VIEW THE AURIC-ARMORED FIGURE...


"... FOR THEIR ATTENTION REMAINS FIXED UPON OTHER, MORE PRACTICAL MATTERS.
"THERE IS NO NEED FOR DOOM TO BRING DOWN THE TELESCOPIC LENSES OF HIS HELMET'S VISOR...
"FOR, EVEN AT THIS DISTANCE, HE BECOMES PAINFULLY AWARE --


"-- THAT LITTLE, IF ANYTHING, HAS CHANGED IN THE LAND BELOW...
"... SINCE THE SON OF A GYPSY HEALER AND A CONDEMNED WITCH WAS COMPELLED TO FLEE ITS ROCKY BOUNDRIES...
"... RETURNING YEARS LATER WITH A *HEART* AS HEAVY AS THE *ARMOR* HE NOW WEARS.

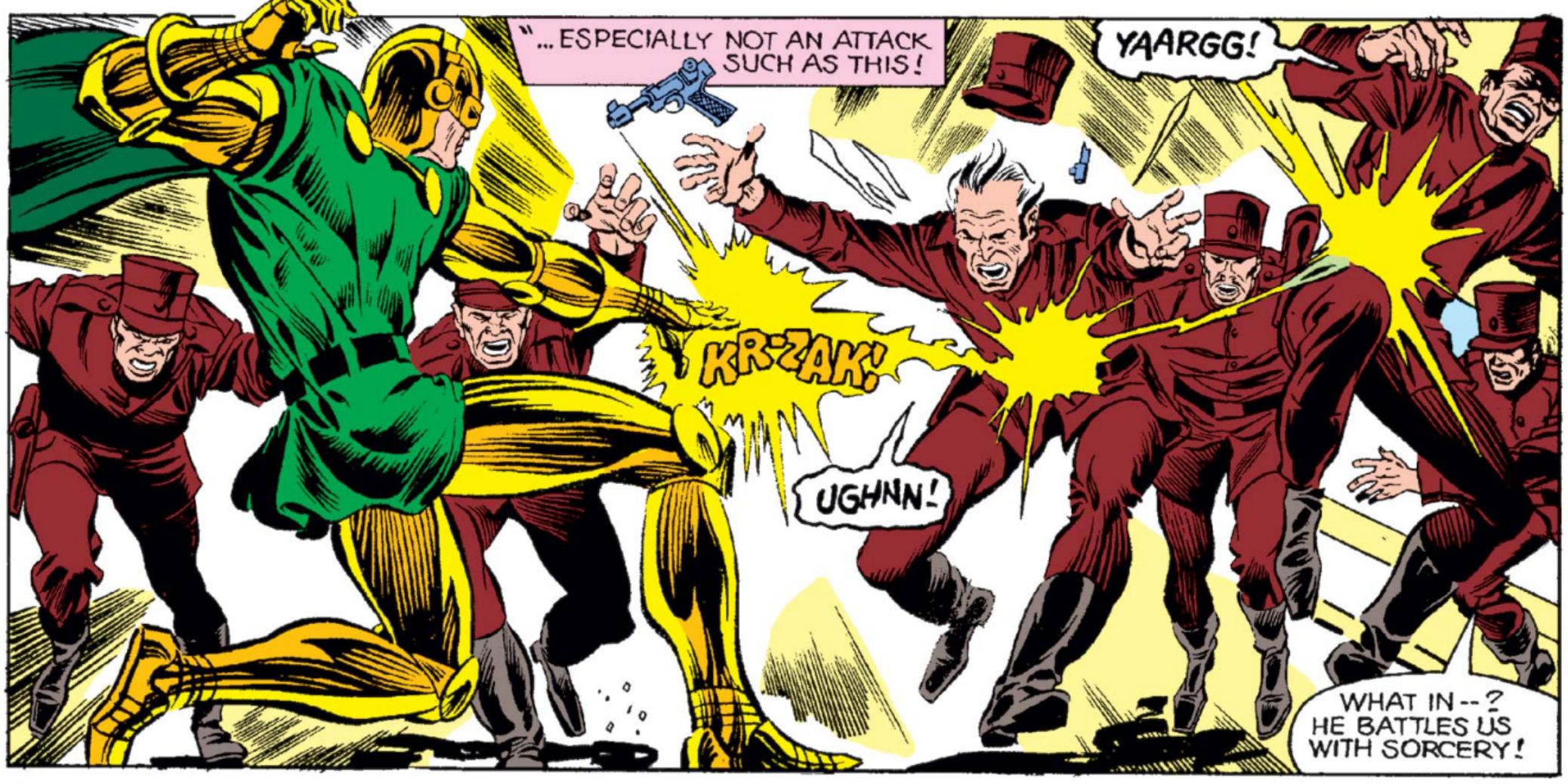

THE LATVERIAN CASTLE --
--TO WHICH MY FATHER WAS TAKEN BEFORE THE BARON ORDERED HIS DEATH.
I UNDERSTAND THE BARON IS NOW ALSO DEAD.
SO WE SHALL SEE WHO NOW SITS IN THE RIGHTFUL THRONE OF DOOM --
-- AND WHO WORKS HIS SUBJECTS LIKE WRETCHED *SLAVES!*

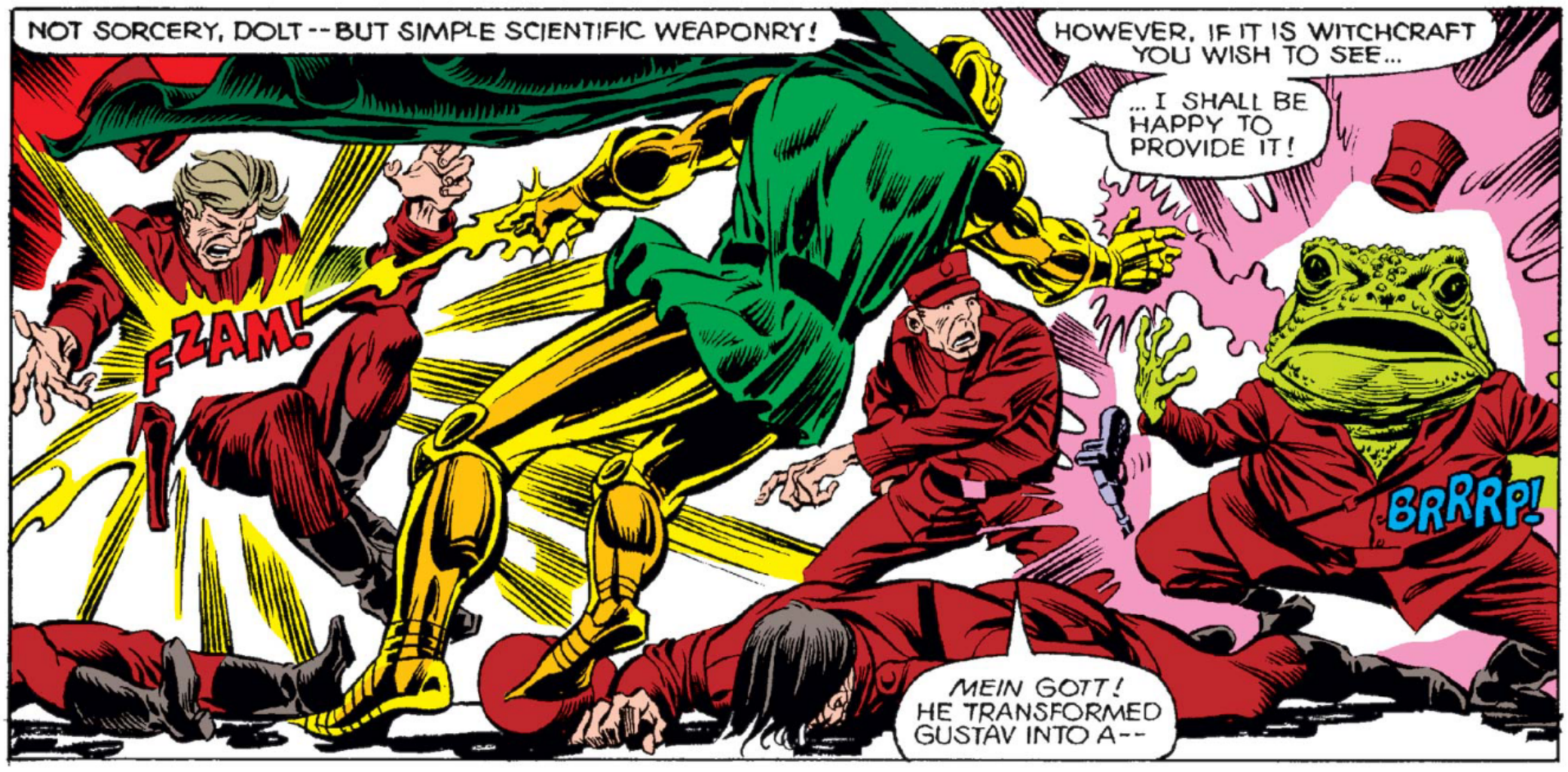
"WITHIN THE CASTLE'S THRONE ROOM...
WELL, SWINE! WHAT IS IT YOU WANT?
YOU HEARD WHAT PRINCE RUDOLFO SAID TO YOU, PEASANT DOG!
SPEAK-- WHILE YOU'VE STILL A WAGGING TONGUE!
HIGHNESS, IT... IT IS THE TAXES, SIRE.
AND WHAT OF THE TAXES, FARMER?
ARE YOU LIKE SO MANY OTHERS-- WHO REFUSE TO PAY ME WHAT THEY OWE?
IT IS NOT THAT I DON'T WANT TO PAY, SIRE...
BUT RATHER THAT I CANNOT.
I AM A POOR MAN, YOUR HIGHNESS...
...WHO'S GIVEN YOU ALL I CAN AFFORD.
MY WIFE... SHE IS SICK, SHE NEEDS MEDICINE, OR ELSE...
THIS IS A THRONE ROOM, PEASANT--NOT SOME LAW COURT TO HEAR YOUR PETTY GRIEVANCES!
THE FACT IS THAT YOU WON'T PAY...
...MAKING YOU NO BETTER THAN THIS KINGDOM'S THIEVING GYPSY POPULATION!
VERY WELL, THEN--
GUARD! TOSS THIS SNIVELING CUR AMONG THE IMPRISONED GYPSY VERMIN--
--UNTIL, IN THE DARKNESS, HE MANAGES TO SCROUNGE UP WHAT HE OWES!
N-NO, SIRE...
I BEG OF YOU NOT TO--


NO NEED TO BEG FOR MERCY FROM THIS WRETCHED TYRANT, PEASANT!
WHAT?! SOME ARMORED INTRUDER, THRUSTING OPEN THE THRONE ROOM DOOR--
KWAM!
BUT WHO--?
WHAT IS WRONG, PRINCE RUDOLFO? DO YOU NOT KNOW THE AVENGER WHO WILL FREE ALL LATVERIA FROM YOUR TYRRANICAL RULE?
DO YOU NOT REMEMBER... DOOM?!

DOOM! OF COURSE--
I SHOULD HAVE RECOGNIZED THAT BRAZEN VOICE--THAT OBNOXIOUS GYPSY ARROGANCE!
GUARDS!

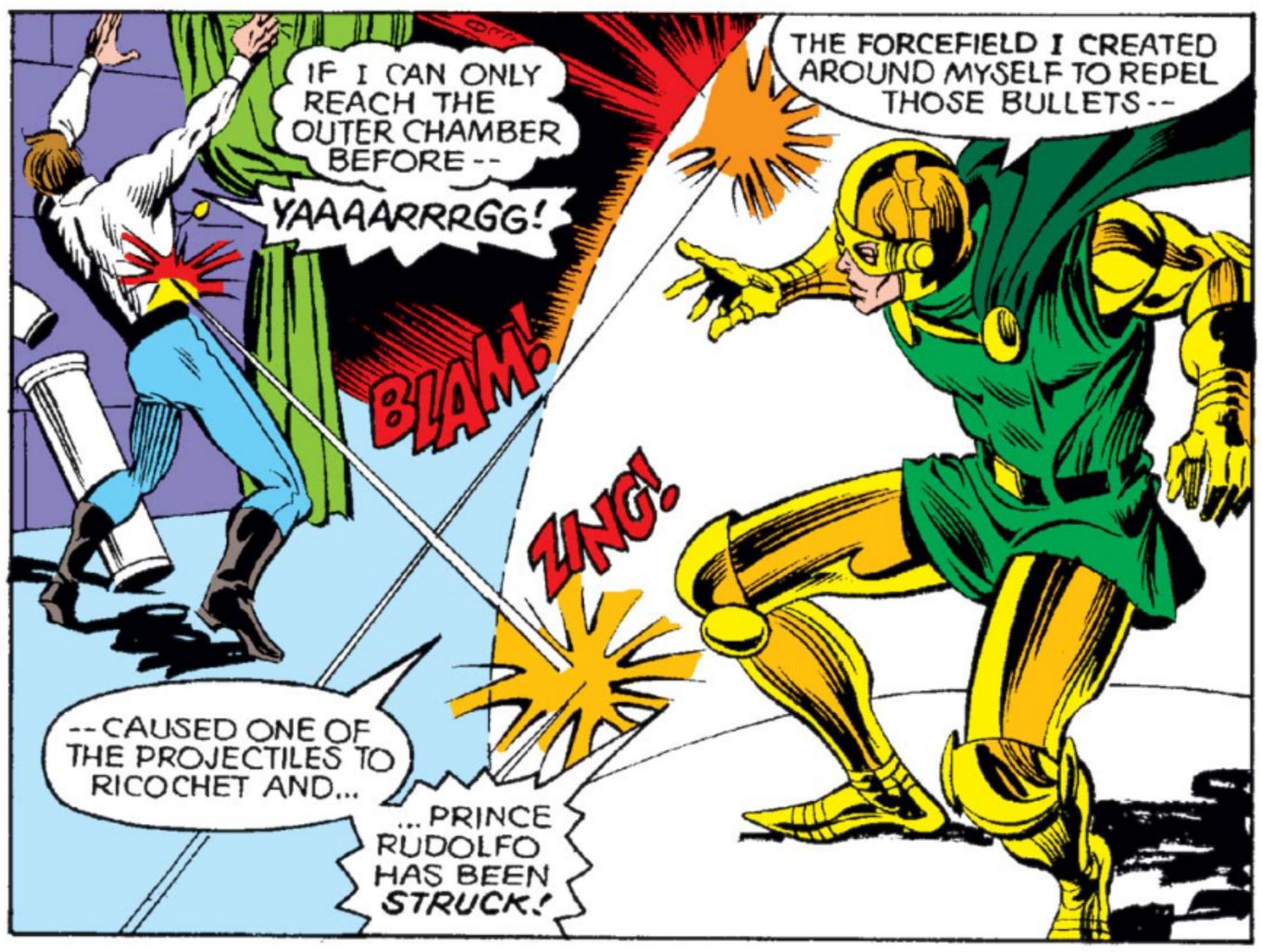
PEEL THE ARMOR OFF THIS SELF-STYLED GOLDEN KNIGHT--
--THEN TOSS HIS GYPSY CARCASS TO THE HOUNDS!
"THEY MOVE SUBSERVIENTLY, NOT KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THEIR GLEAMING FOE...

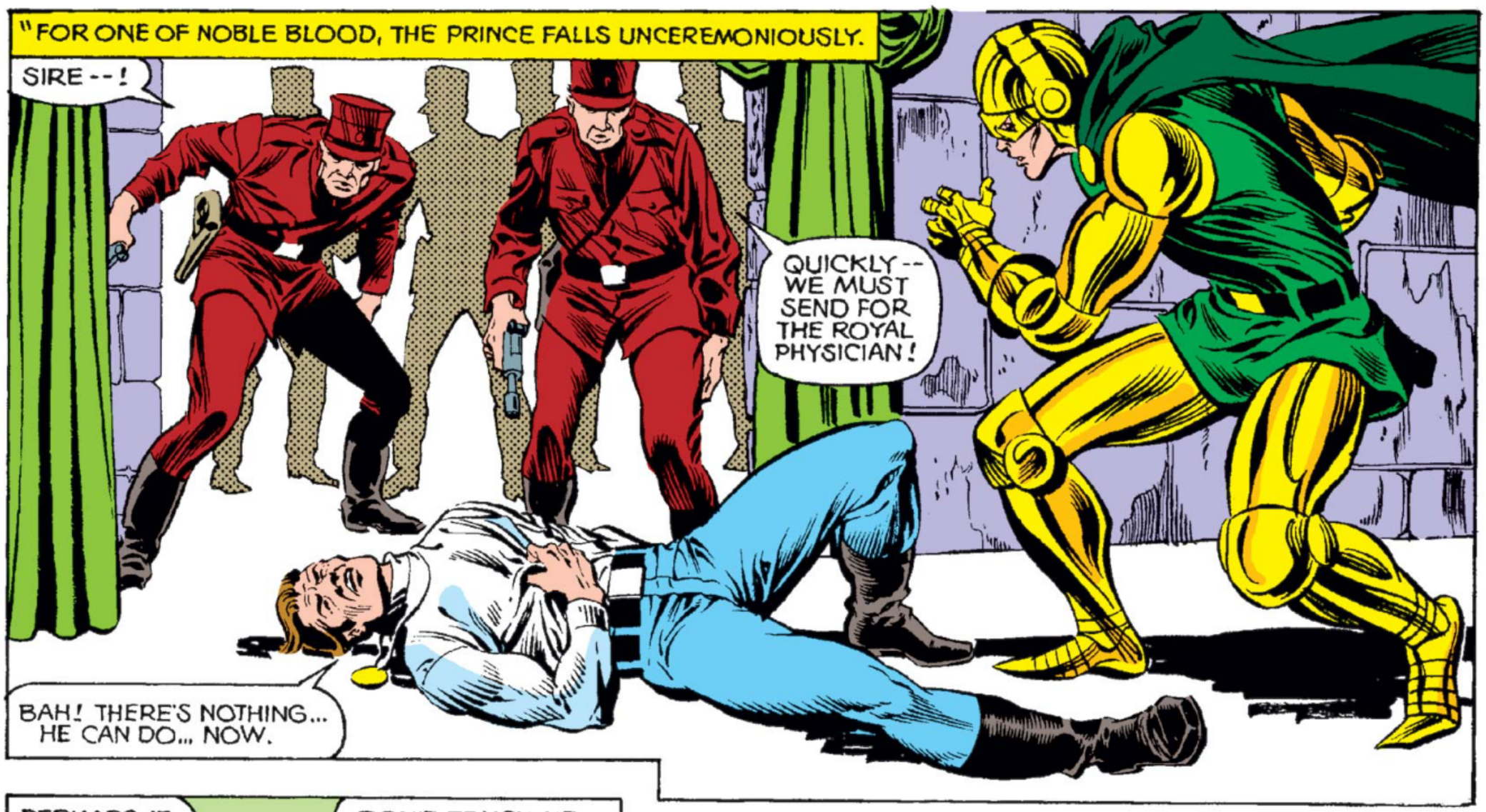

"...ESPECIALLY NOT AN ATTACK SUCH AS THIS!
YAARGG!
KR-ZAK!
UGHNN!
WHAT IN--? HE BATTLES US WITH SORCERY!


NOT SORCERY, DOLT--BUT SIMPLE SCIENTIFIC WEAPONRY!
HOWEVER, IF IT IS WITCHCRAFT YOU WISH TO SEE...
... I SHALL BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE IT!
FZAM!
BRRRP!
MEIN GOTT! HE TRANSFORMED GUSTAV INTO A--

I SHALL DO FAR WORSE THAN THAT, YOU UNIFORMED LACKEYS!
NOW HE SHOOTS FLAMES AT US, AS WOULD SATAN HIMSE--
Y!!!!!!!!!!!
HE'S NOT HUMAN, SIRE! WHAT SHALL WE DO?!

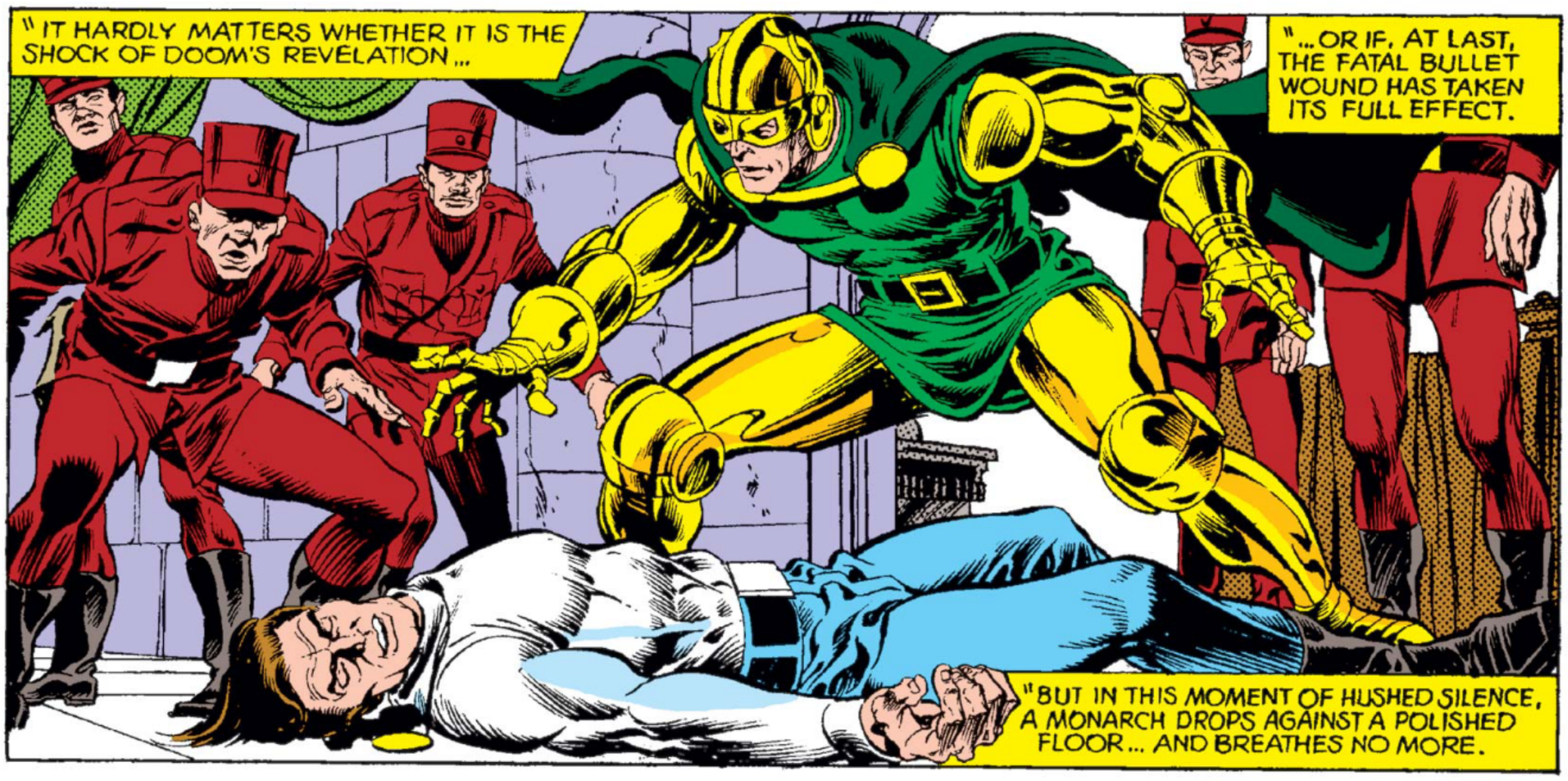
DON'T JUST STAND THERE--
SHOOT HIM DOWN!
SPILL HIS TAINTED GYPSY BLOOD!
WHILE I MAKE A QUICK RETREAT BEFORE FALLING VICTIM TO DOOM'S FREAKISH POWERS.

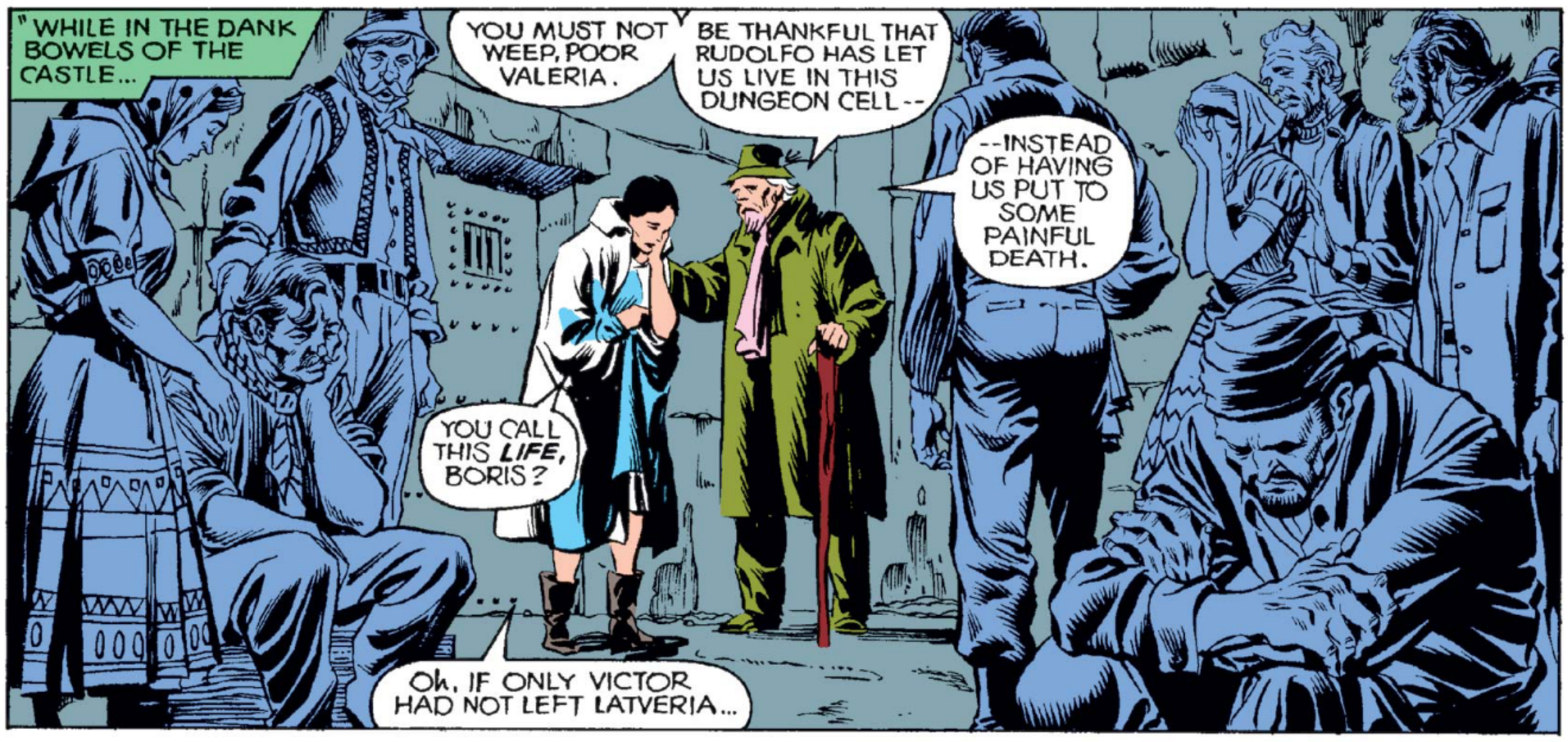

IF I CAN ONLY REACH THE OUTER CHAMBER BEFORE--
YAAAARRRGG!
BLAM!
ZING!
THE FORCEFIELD I CREATED AROUND MYSELF TO REPEL THOSE BULLETS--
--CAUSED ONE OF THE PROJECTILES TO RICOCHET AND...
... PRINCE RUDOLFO HAS BEEN STRUCK!


"FOR ONE OF NOBLE BLOOD, THE PRINCE FALLS UNCEREMONIOUSLY.
SIRE --!
QUICKLY -- WE MUST SEND FOR THE ROYAL PHYSICIAN!
BAH! THERE'S NOTHING... HE CAN DO... NOW.

PERHAPS IF I SPEED YOU TO HIM, UTILIZING MY JETS --
DON'T TOUCH ME WITH THOSE THIEVING GYPSY HANDS, DOOM...
...GLOVED THOUGH THEY BE.
I'D RATHER... DIE LIKE A DOG FIRST!

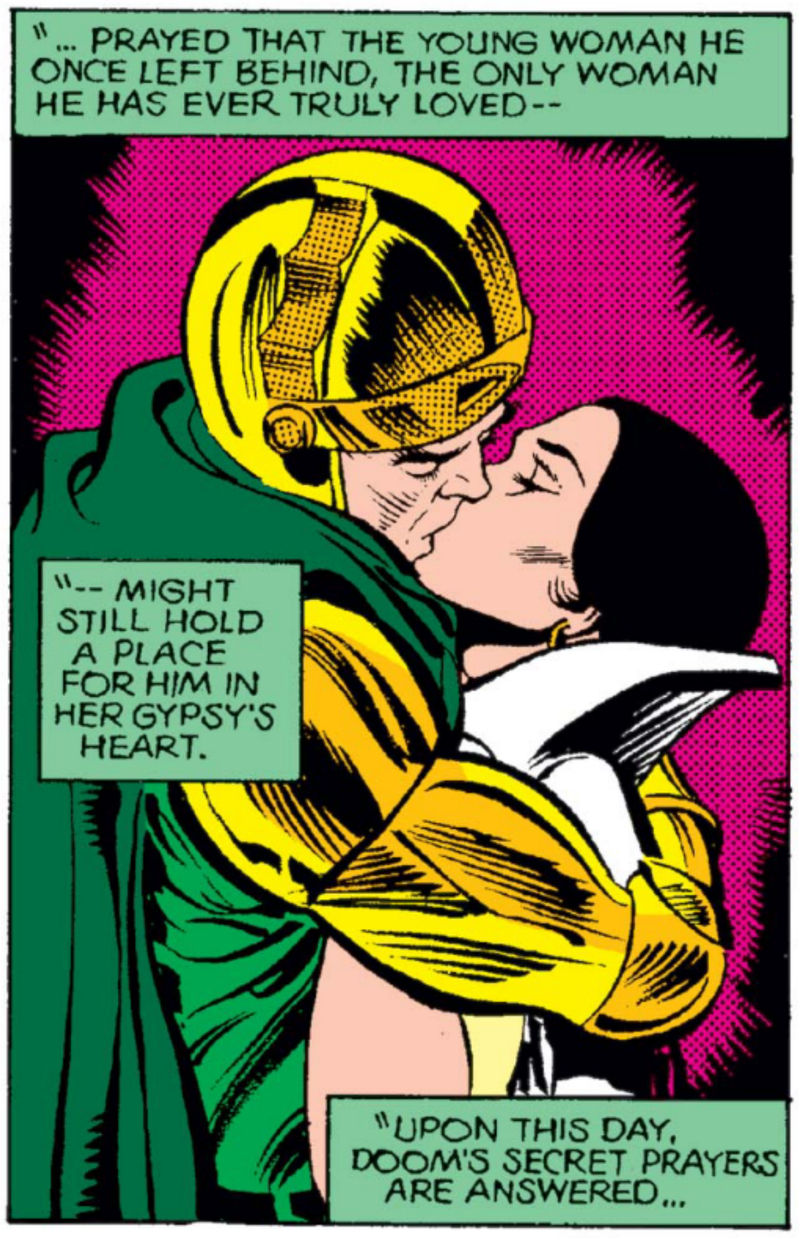
THE OLD RIVALRIES BETWEEN NOBLE AND GYPSY ENDURE TO THE VERY END, eh, RUDOLFO?
MORE THAN THAT, DOOM! I TAKE TO THE GRAVE... THE RICHEST SECRET OF ALL... CONCERNING YOU, GYPSY!
THAT VICTOR VON DOOM IS THE RIGHTFUL RULER OF LATVERIA?
Y-YOU KNOW... ?!?

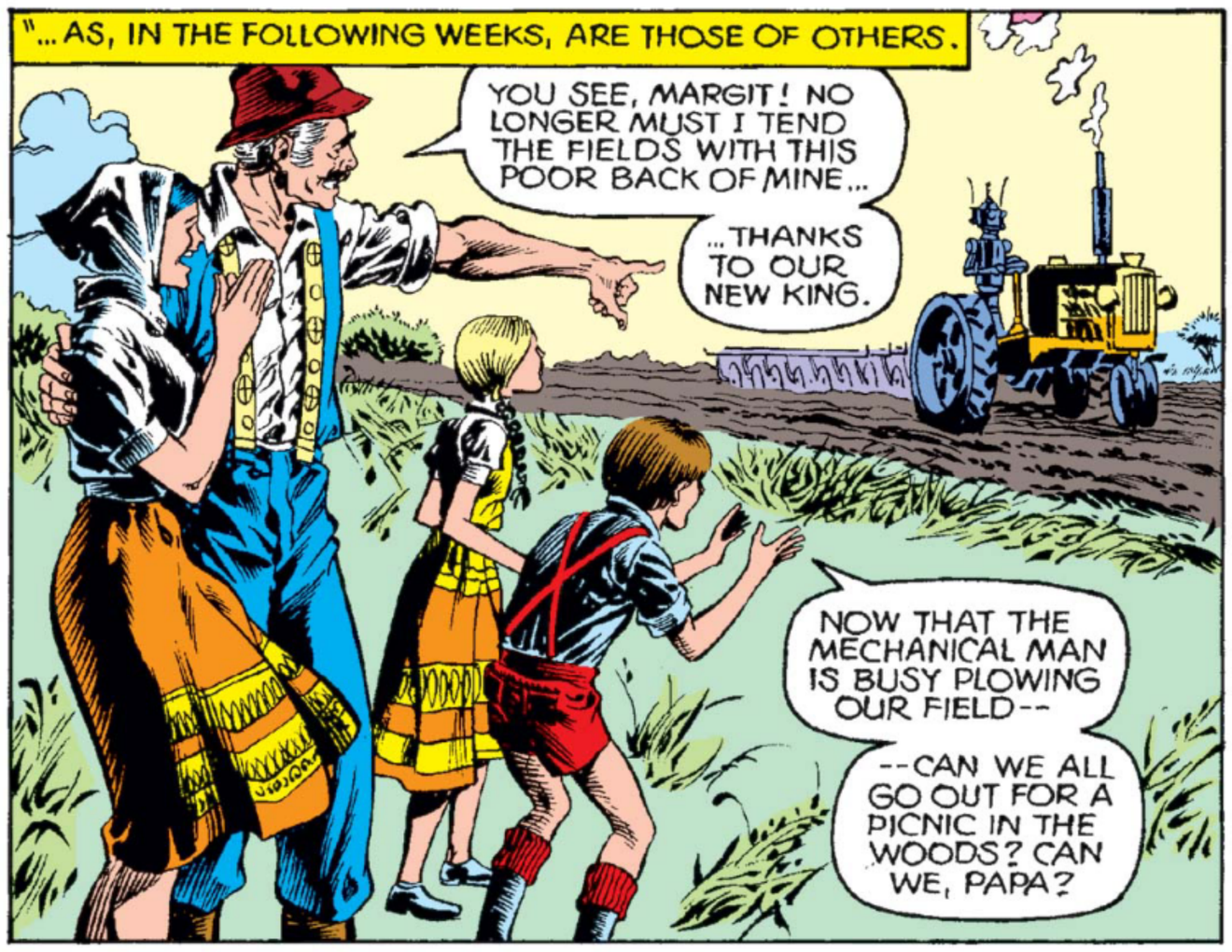

"IT HARDLY MATTERS WHETHER IT IS THE SHOCK OF DOOM'S REVELATION...
"...OR IF, AT LAST, THE FATAL BULLET WOUND HAS TAKEN ITS FULL EFFECT.
"BUT IN THIS MOMENT OF HUSHED SILENCE, A MONARCH DROPS AGAINST A POLISHED FLOOR... AND BREATHES NO MORE.


"WHILE IN THE DANK BOWELS OF THE CASTLE...
YOU MUST NOT WEEP, POOR VALERIA.
BE THANKFUL THAT RUDOLFO HAS LET US LIVE IN THIS DUNGEON CELL--
--INSTEAD OF HAVING US PUT TO SOME PAINFUL DEATH.
YOU CALL THIS LIFE, BORIS?
Oh, IF ONLY VICTOR HAD NOT LEFT LATVERIA...

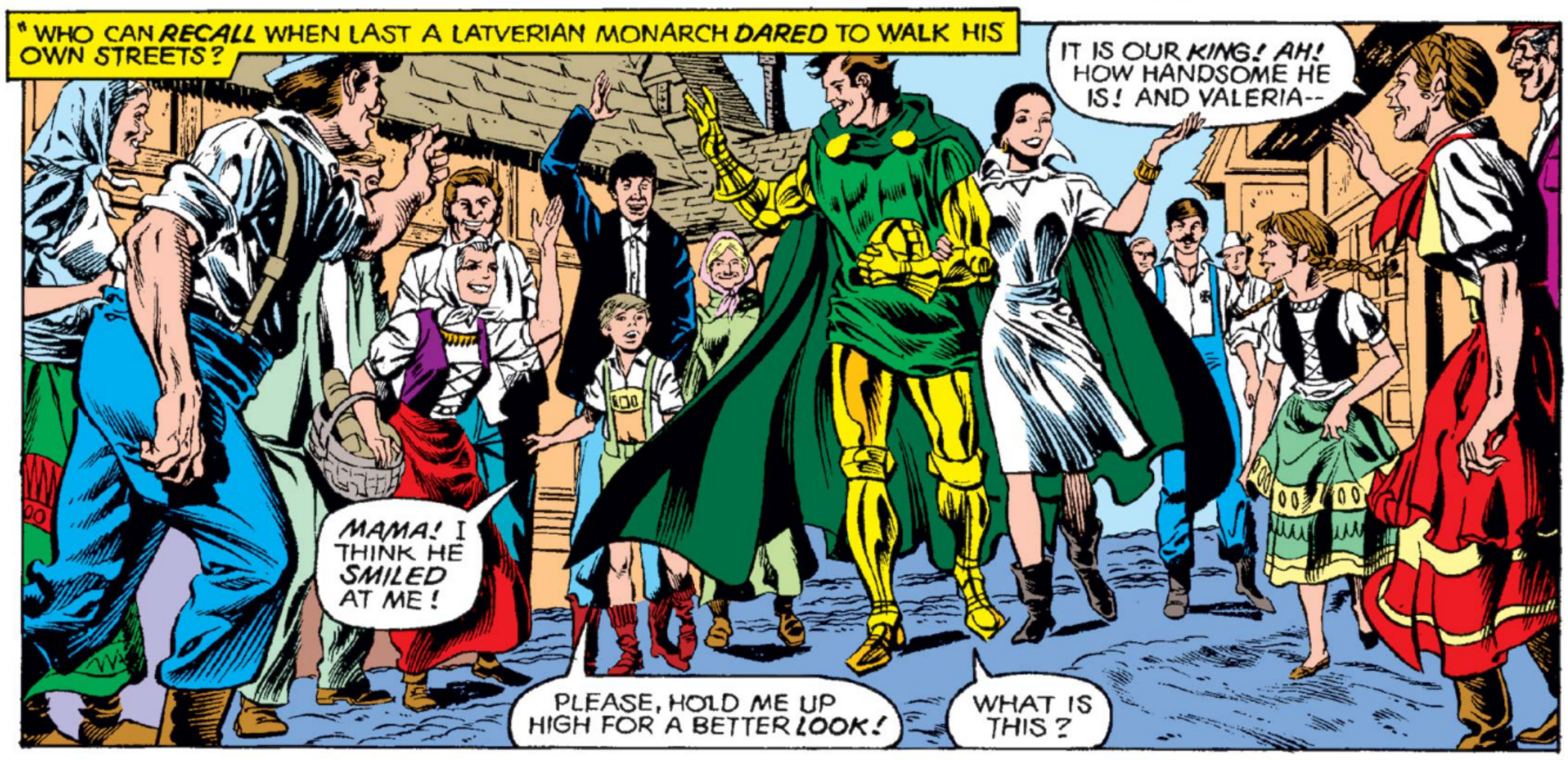
... HE MAY HAVE DEVISED SOME MEANS TO FREE US FROM THIS-- GOOD LORD!
IT SEEMS TO BE FREEZING...
...SO MUCH THAT IT BEGINS TO CRACK!
SSS-KRK!
BORIS-- WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE WALL?
THEN EITHER OUR EYES DECEIVE US FROM TOO MANY DAYS IN THIS DARKNESS, OR ELSE--

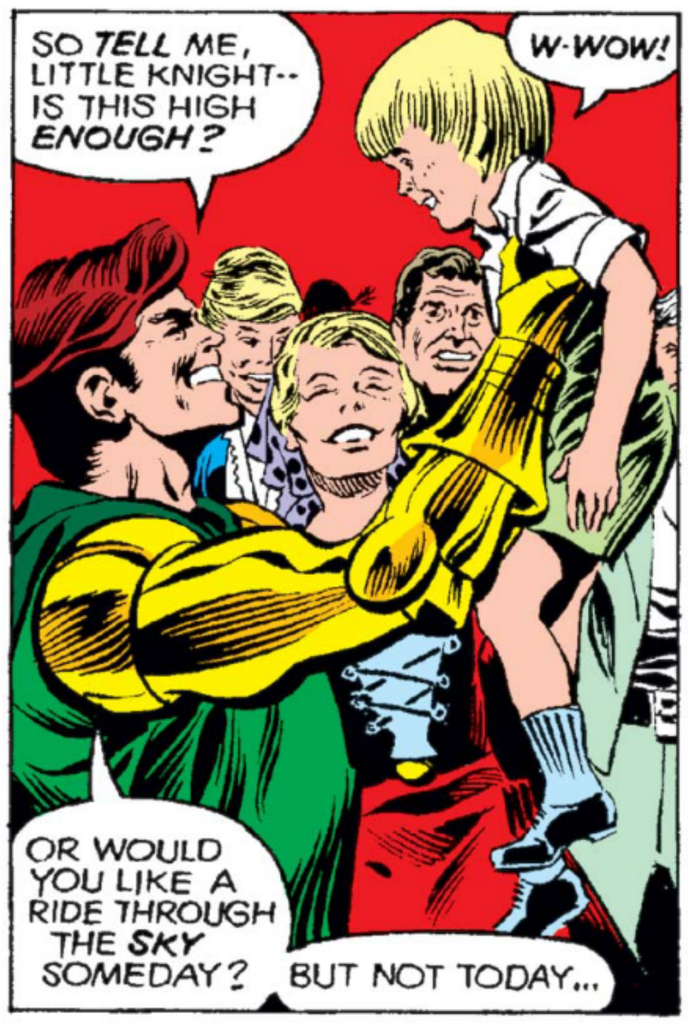
OR ELSE YOUR LIBERATOR IS HERE AT LAST, FRIEND LOJOS!
A LIBERATOR CALLED DOOM!
A LIBERATOR WHO ONCE RODE WITH YOUR BAND!
OH, VICTOR! I PRAYED THAT YOU'D EVENTUALLY COME, AND--!
KRAMM!
"AND, PERHAPS IN HIS MOST PRIVATE MOMENTS, DOOM HAS ALSO SILENTLY PRAYED...

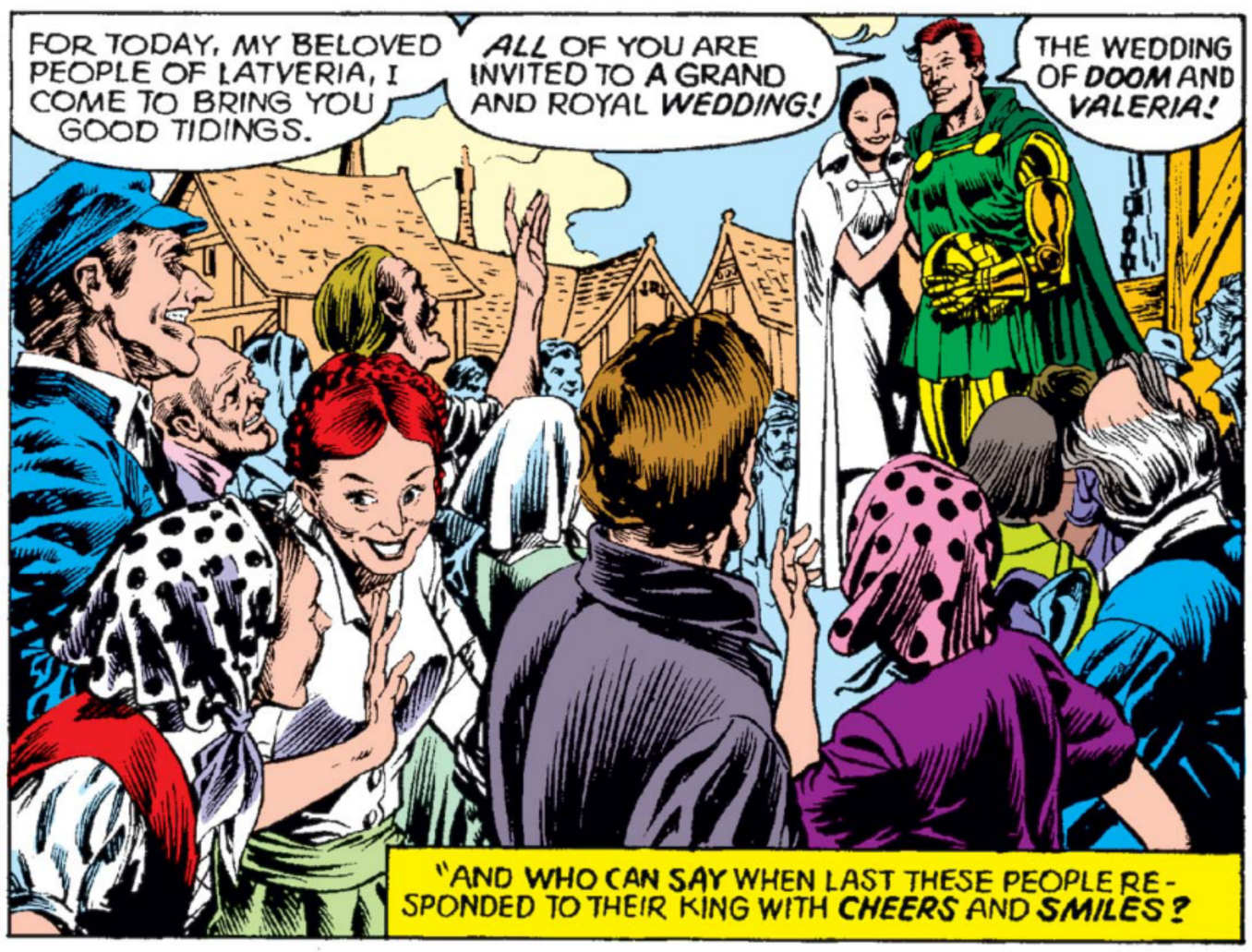

"... PRAYED THAT THE YOUNG WOMAN HE ONCE LEFT BEHIND, THE ONLY WOMAN HE HAS EVER TRULY LOVED--
"-- MIGHT STILL HOLD A PLACE FOR HIM IN HER GYPSY'S HEART.
"UPON THIS DAY, DOOM'S SECRET PRAYERS ARE ANSWERED...

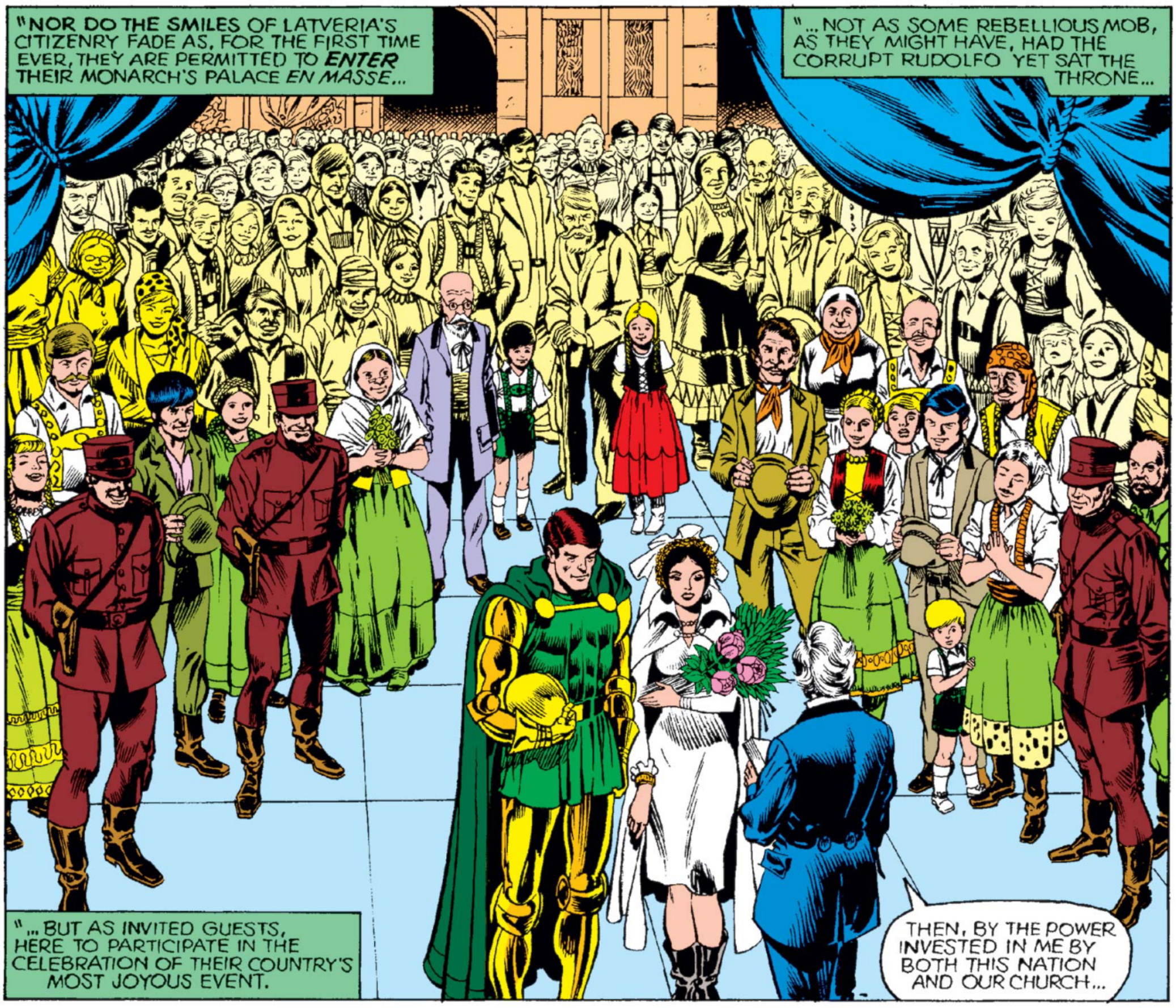

"... AS, IN THE FOLLOWING WEEKS, ARE THOSE OF OTHERS.
YOU SEE, MARGIT! NO LONGER MUST I TEND THE FIELDS WITH THIS POOR BACK OF MINE...
...THANKS TO OUR NEW KING.
NOW THAT THE MECHANICAL MAN IS BUSY PLOWING OUR FIELD--
--CAN WE ALL GO OUT FOR A PICNIC IN THE WOODS? CAN WE, PAPA?

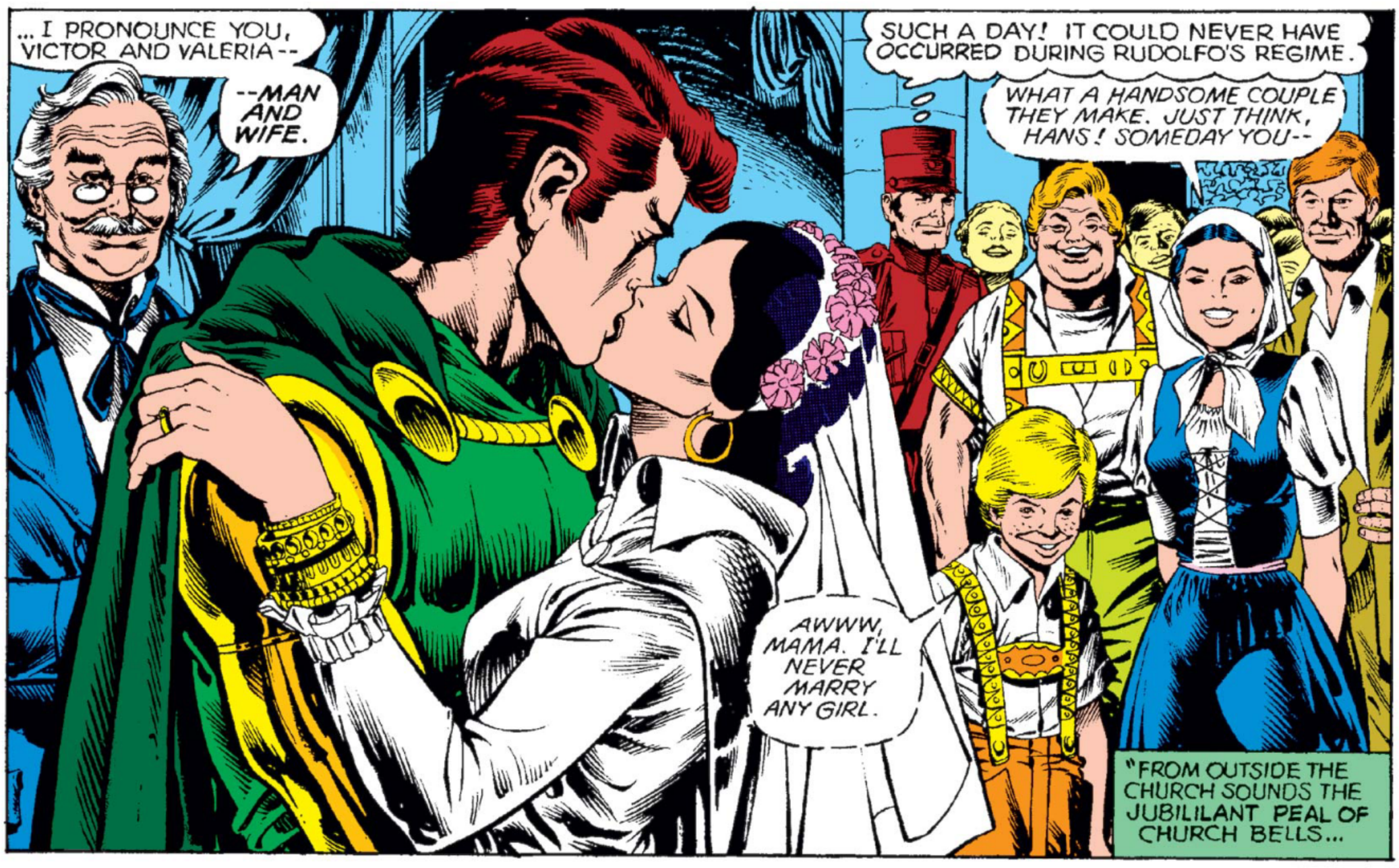
I'LL BE FINISHED MOMENTARILY, FERENC.
YET, IF NOT FOR THIS BURNING DEVICE PROVIDED US BY DOOM...
...WHO COULD TELL HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE TO CUT THROUGH THIS STEEL GIRDER?

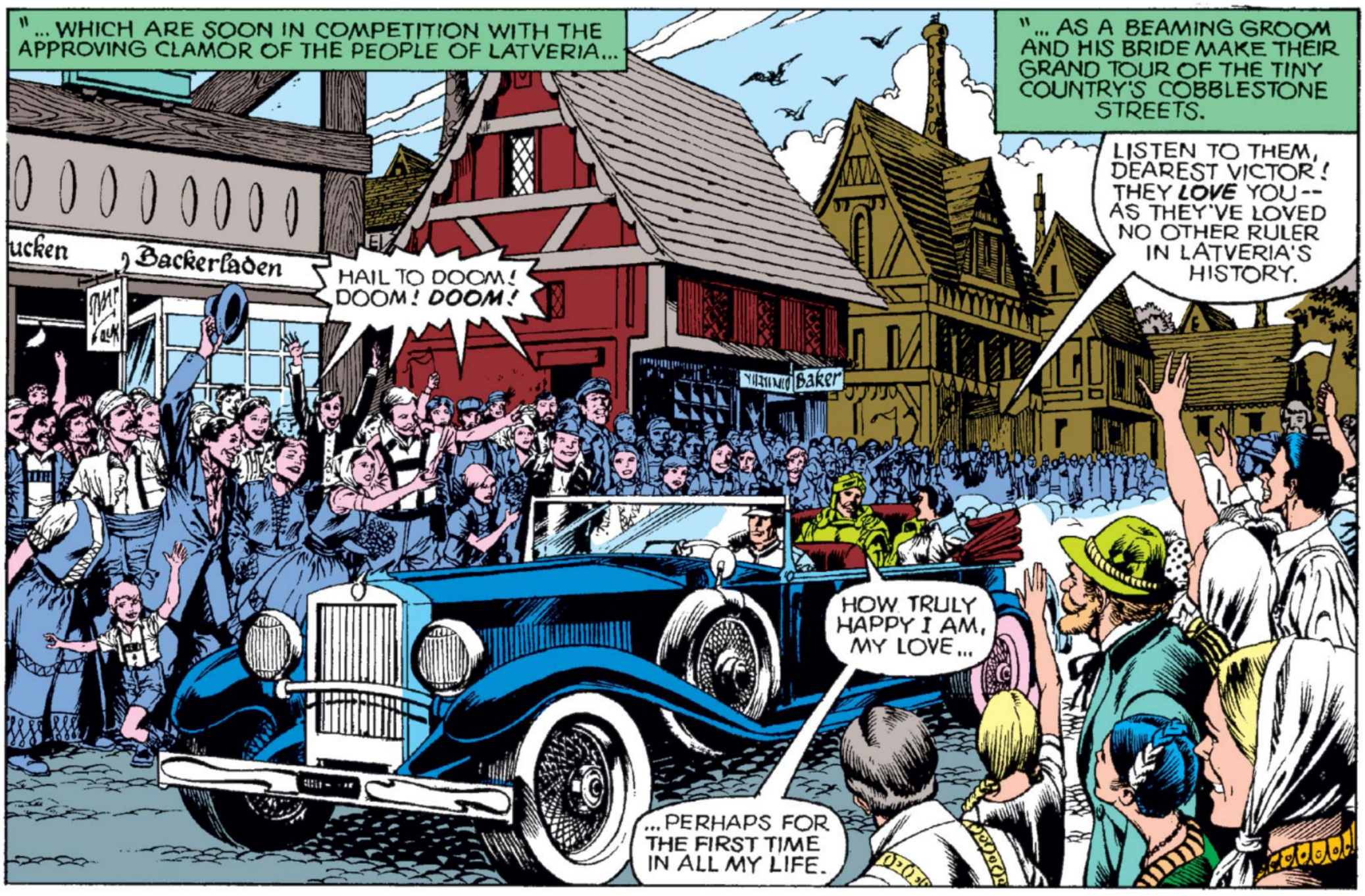

"WHO CAN RECALL WHEN LAST A LATVERIAN MONARCH DARED TO WALK HIS OWN STREETS?
IT IS OUR KING! AH! HOW HANDSOME HE IS! AND VALERIA--
MAMA! I THINK HE SMILED AT ME!
PLEASE, HOLD ME UP HIGH FOR A BETTER LOOK!
WHAT IS THIS?

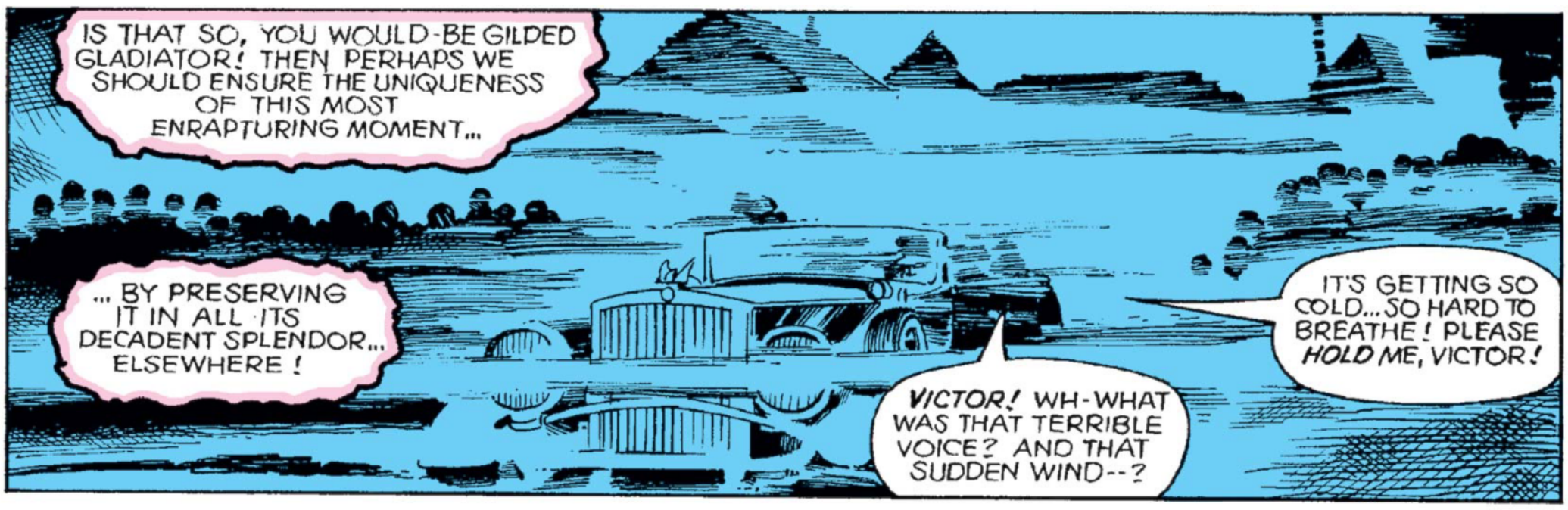

SO TELL ME, LITTLE KNIGHT-- IS THIS HIGH ENOUGH?
W-WOW!
OR WOULD YOU LIKE A RIDE THROUGH THE SKY SOMEDAY?
BUT NOT TODAY...

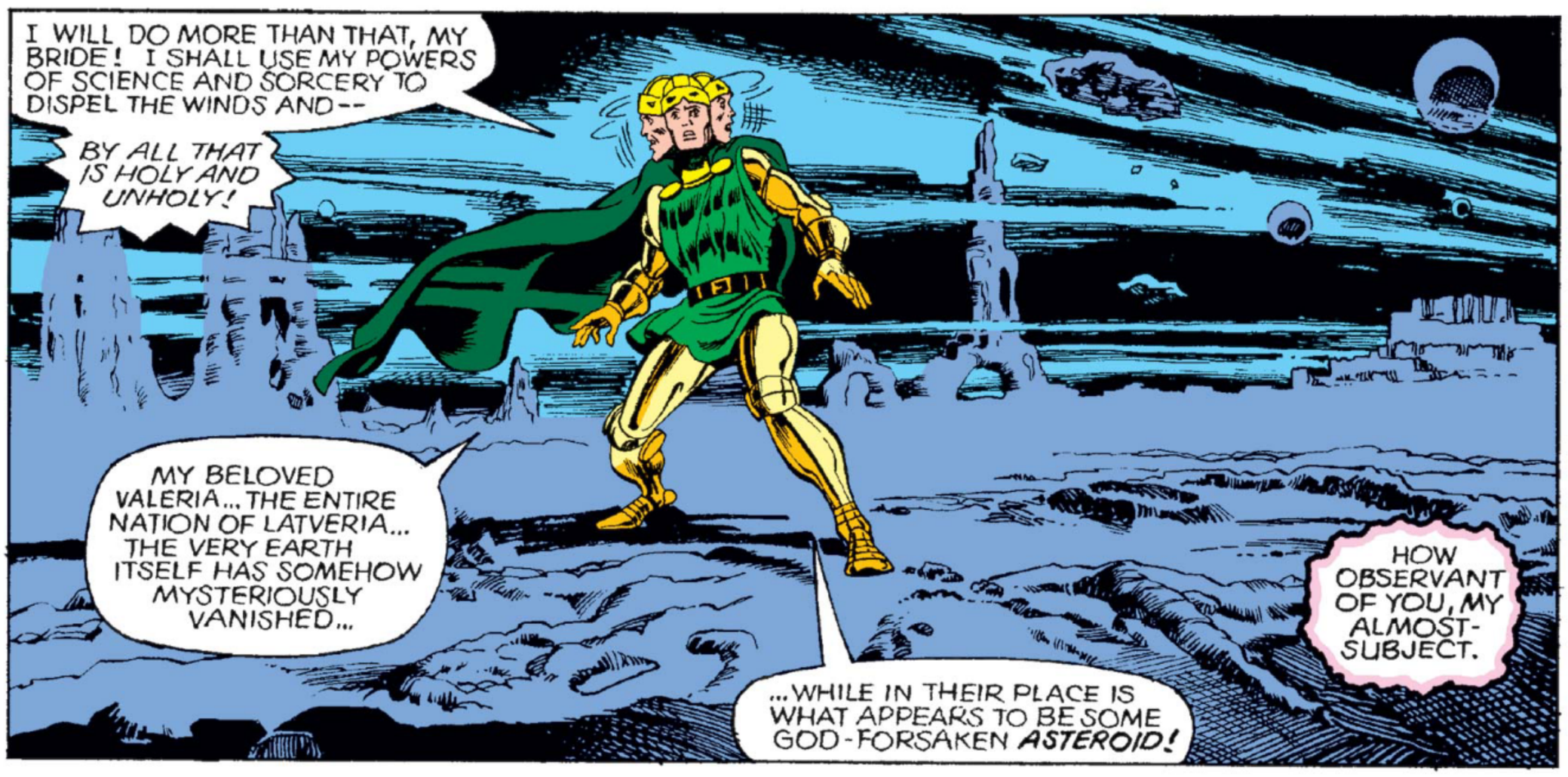

FOR TODAY, MY BELOVED PEOPLE OF LATVERIA, I COME TO BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS.
ALL OF YOU ARE INVITED TO A GRAND AND ROYAL WEDDING!
THE WEDDING OF DOOM AND VALERIA!
"AND WHO CAN SAY WHEN LAST THESE PEOPLE RESPONDED TO THEIR KING WITH CHEERS AND SMILES?


"NOR DO THE SMILES OF LATVERIA'S CITIZENRY FADE AS, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, THEY ARE PERMITTED TO ENTER THEIR MONARCH'S PALACE EN MASSE...
"...NOT AS SOME REBELLIOUS MOB, AS THEY MIGHT HAVE, HAD THE CORRUPT RUDOLFO YET SAT THE THRONE...
"...BUT AS INVITED GUESTS, HERE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE CELEBRATION OF THEIR COUNTRY'S MOST JOYOUS EVENT.
THEN, BY THE POWER INVESTED IN ME BY BOTH THIS NATION AND OUR CHURCH...


...I PRONOUNCE YOU, VICTOR AND VALERIA--
--MAN AND WIFE.
SUCH A DAY! IT COULD NEVER HAVE OCCURRED DURING RUDOLFO'S REGIME.
WHAT A HANDSOME COUPLE THEY MAKE. JUST THINK, HANS! SOMEDAY YOU--
AWWW, MAMA. I'LL NEVER MARRY ANY GIRL.
"FROM OUTSIDE THE CHURCH SOUNDS THE JUBILILANT PEAL OF CHURCH BELLS...

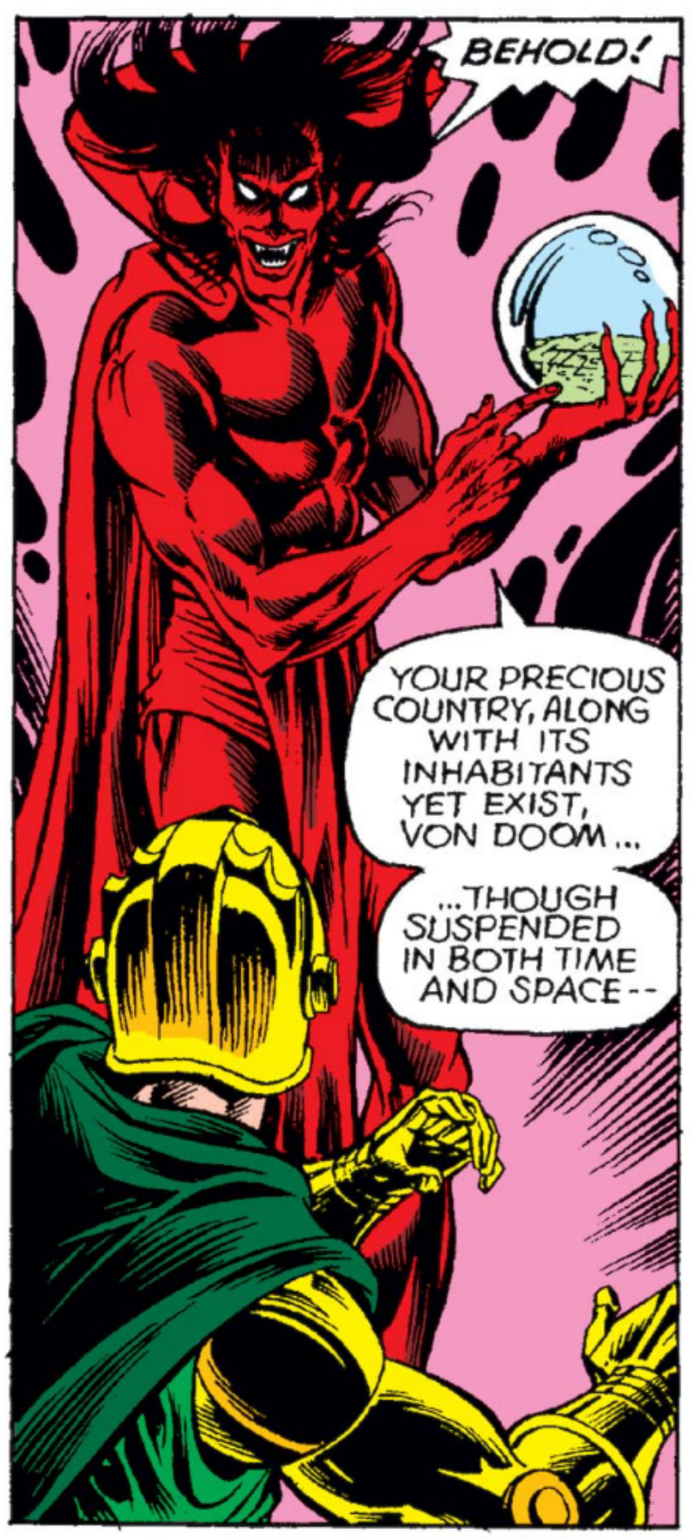

"... WHICH ARE SOON IN COMPETITION WITH THE APPROVING CLAMOR OF THE PEOPLE OF LATVERIA...
"... AS A BEAMING GROOM AND HIS BRIDE MAKE THEIR GRAND TOUR OF THE TINY COUNTRY'S COBBLESTONE STREETS.
LISTEN TO THEM, DEAREST VICTOR! THEY LOVE YOU -- AS THEY'VE LOVED NO OTHER RULER IN LATVERIA'S HISTORY.
Backerladen
Baker
HAIL TO DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!
HOW TRULY HAPPY I AM, MY LOVE...
...PERHAPS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ALL MY LIFE.


IS THAT SO, YOU WOULD-BE GILDED GLADIATOR! THEN PERHAPS WE SHOULD ENSURE THE UNIQUENESS OF THIS MOST ENRAPTURING MOMENT...
... BY PRESERVING IT IN ALL ITS DECADENT SPLENDOR... ELSEWHERE!
IT'S GETTING SO COLD... SO HARD TO BREATHE! PLEASE HOLD ME, VICTOR!
VICTOR! WH-WHAT WAS THAT TERRIBLE VOICE? AND THAT SUDDEN WIND--?


I WILL DO MORE THAN THAT, MY BRIDE! I SHALL USE MY POWERS OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY TO DISPEL THE WINDS AND--
BY ALL THAT IS HOLY AND UNHOLY!
MY BELOVED VALERIA... THE ENTIRE NATION OF LATVERIA... THE VERY EARTH ITSELF HAS SOMEHOW MYSTERIOUSLY VANISHED...
...WHILE IN THEIR PLACE IS WHAT APPEARS TO BE SOME GOD-FORSAKEN ASTEROID!
HOW OBSERVANT OF YOU, MY ALMOST-SUBJECT.

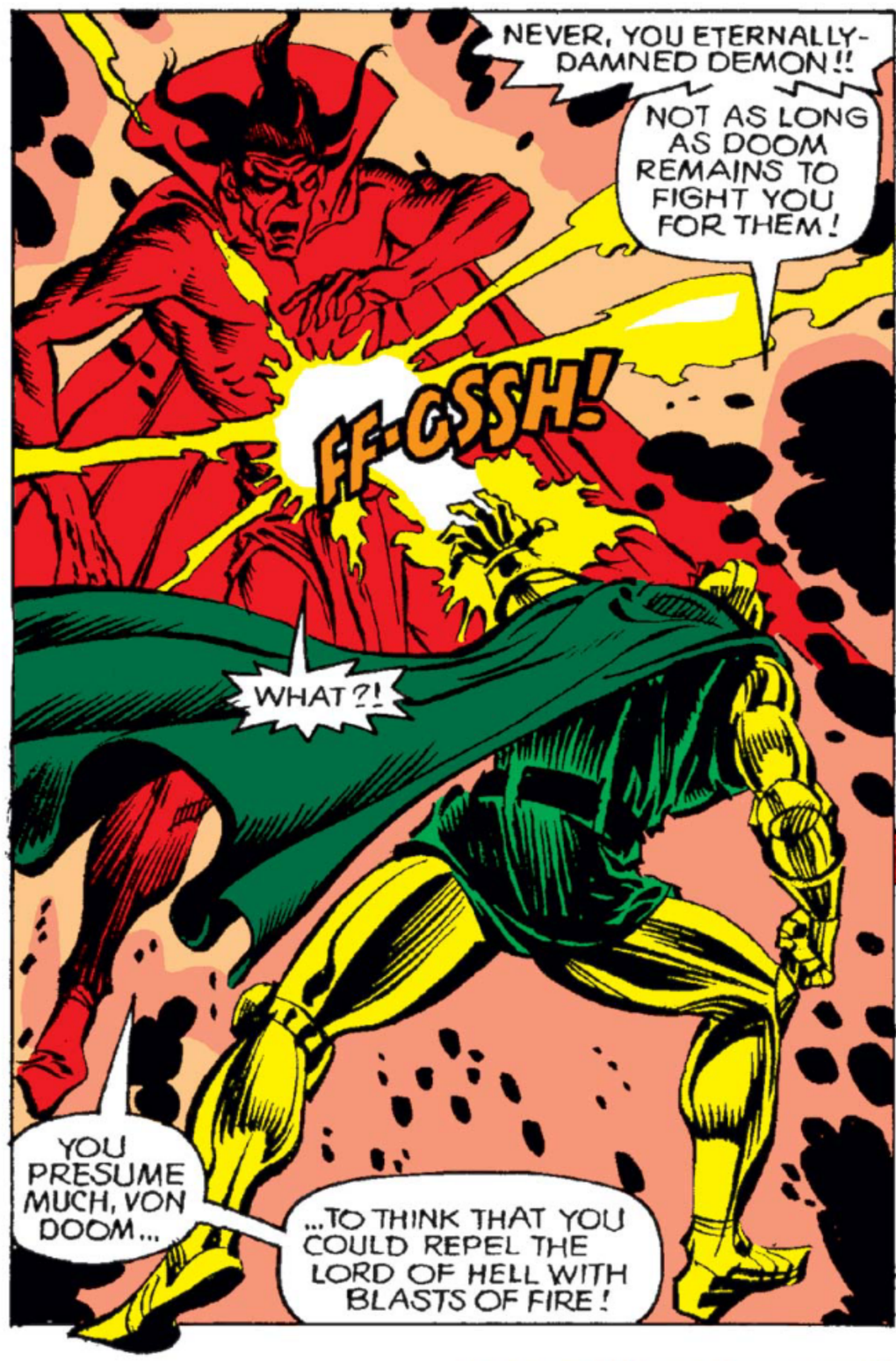
THAT TAUNTING, EVIL VOICE AGAIN... SOMEHOW SEEMS FAMILIAR TO ME!
AS WELL IT SHOULD, VICTOR VON DOOM. FOR, IN TIMES PAST, IT DID SPEAK TO YOUR VERY SOUL--
--IN THOSE EARLIER DAYS, WHEN YOU READILY SUCCUMBED TO MY TEMPTATIONS.
THAT WAS BEFORE YOU... CHANGED.
WHO ARE YOU?
AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO VALERIA... TO MY COUNTRY?

YOU WISH ANSWERS, ARROGANT ONE?
SO BE IT!
WHAT?! IT IS... SATAN?!
"MEPHISTO" SHALL SUFFICE, MORTAL.
AND AS TO YOUR QUERY REGARDING THE WHEREABOUTS OF INSIGNIFICANT LATVERIA...

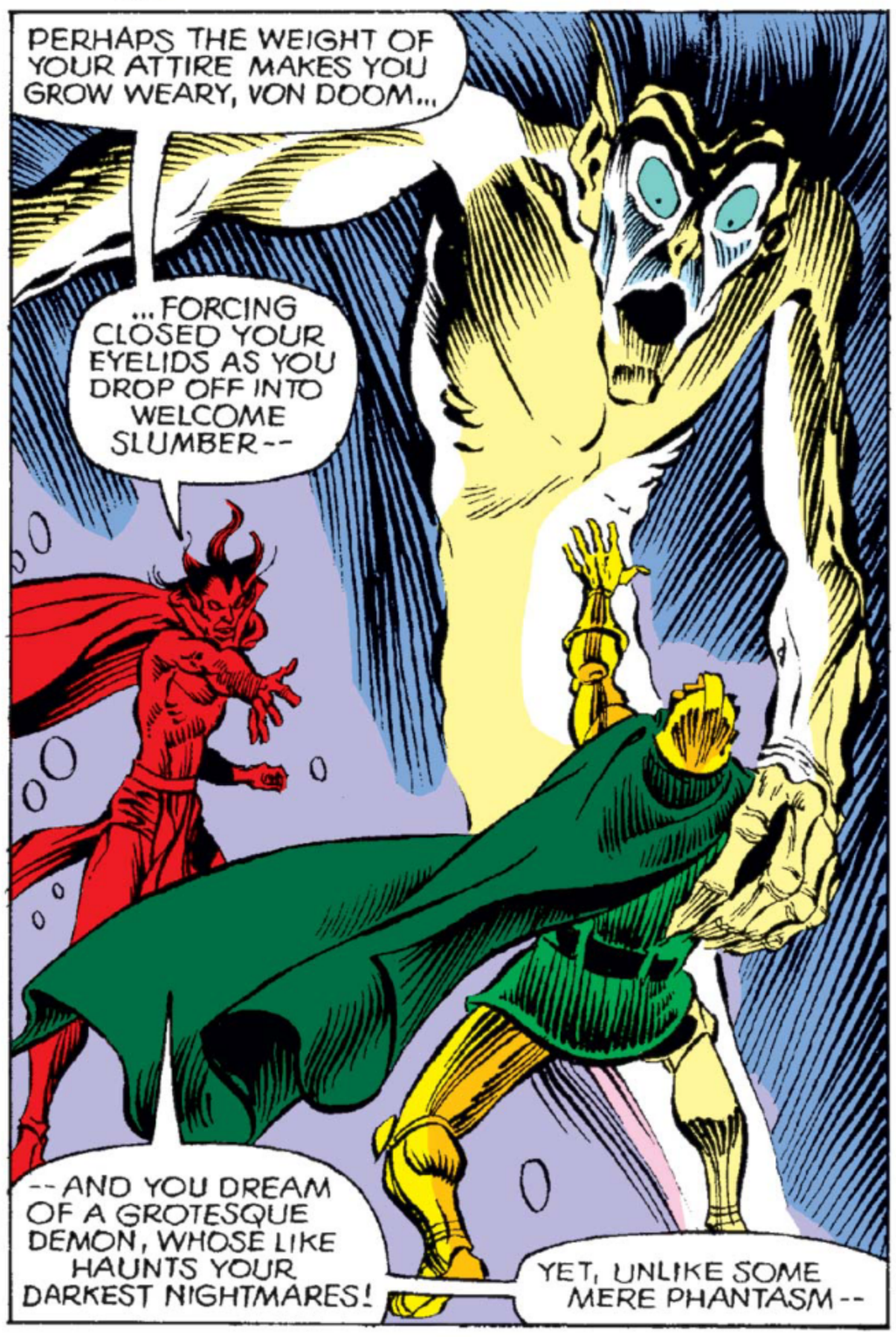

BEHOLD!
YOUR PRECIOUS COUNTRY, ALONG WITH ITS INHABITANTS YET EXIST, VON DOOM...
...THOUGH SUSPENDED IN BOTH TIME AND SPACE--

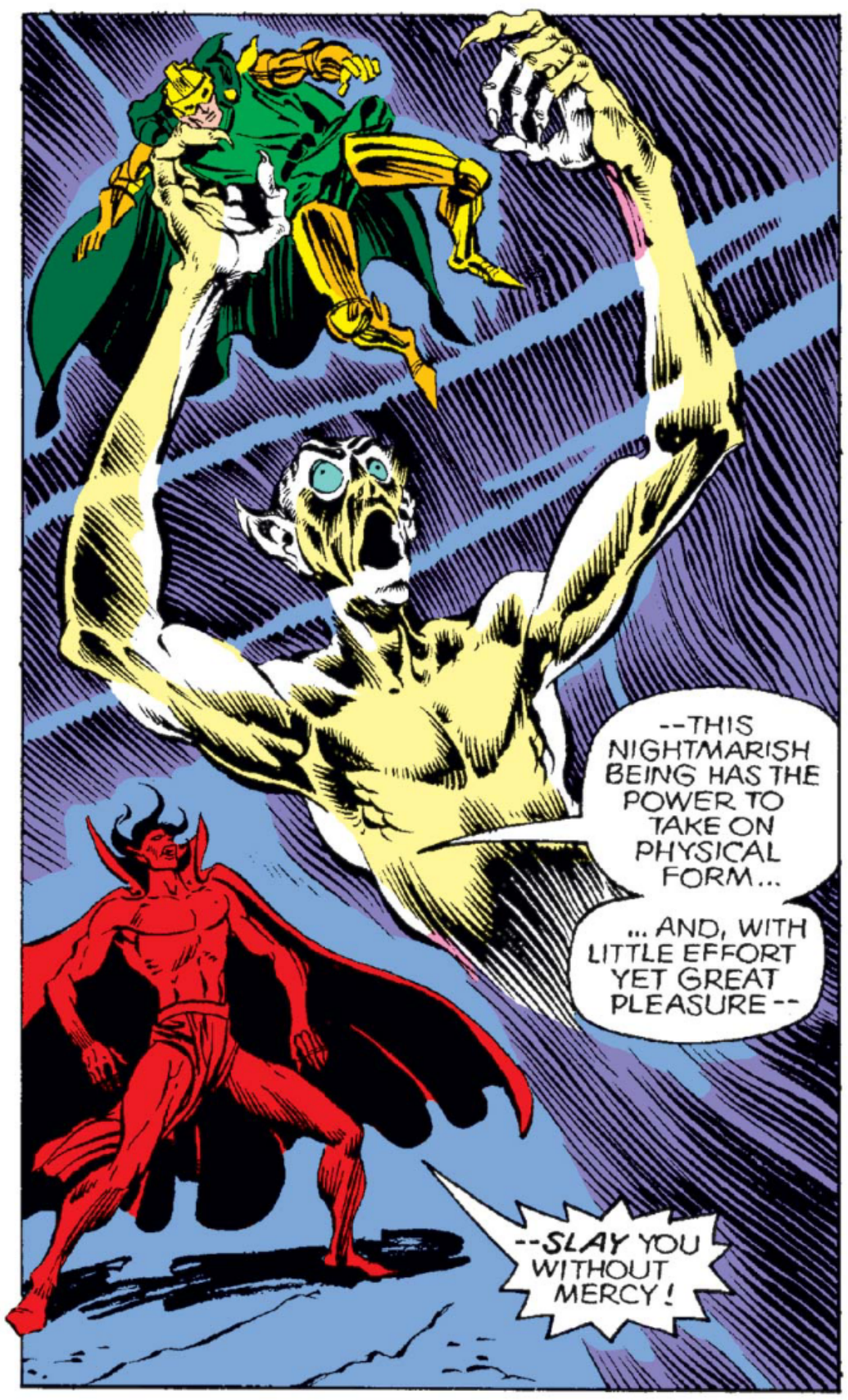
--WITHIN THIS HELL-SPAWNED GLOBE.
BUT-- WHY?
WHY? ONCE YOU STOLE A SOUL FROM ME, MORTAL...

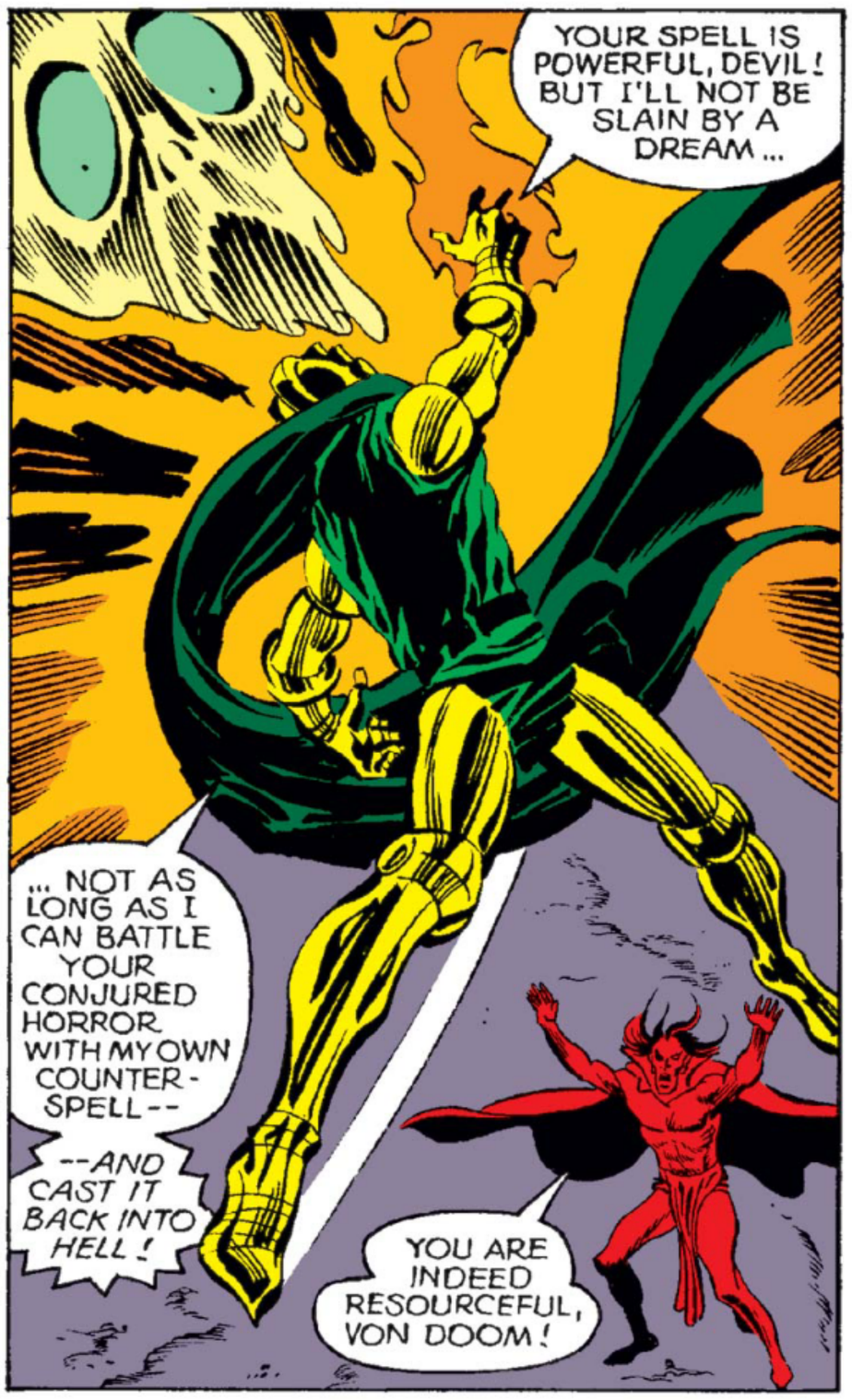
...ONE WHICH WAS RIGHTFULLY MINE.
NOW YOU SHALL MAKE RETRIBUTION...
...WITH THE COLLECTED SOULS OF ALL YOUR COUNTRYMEN!

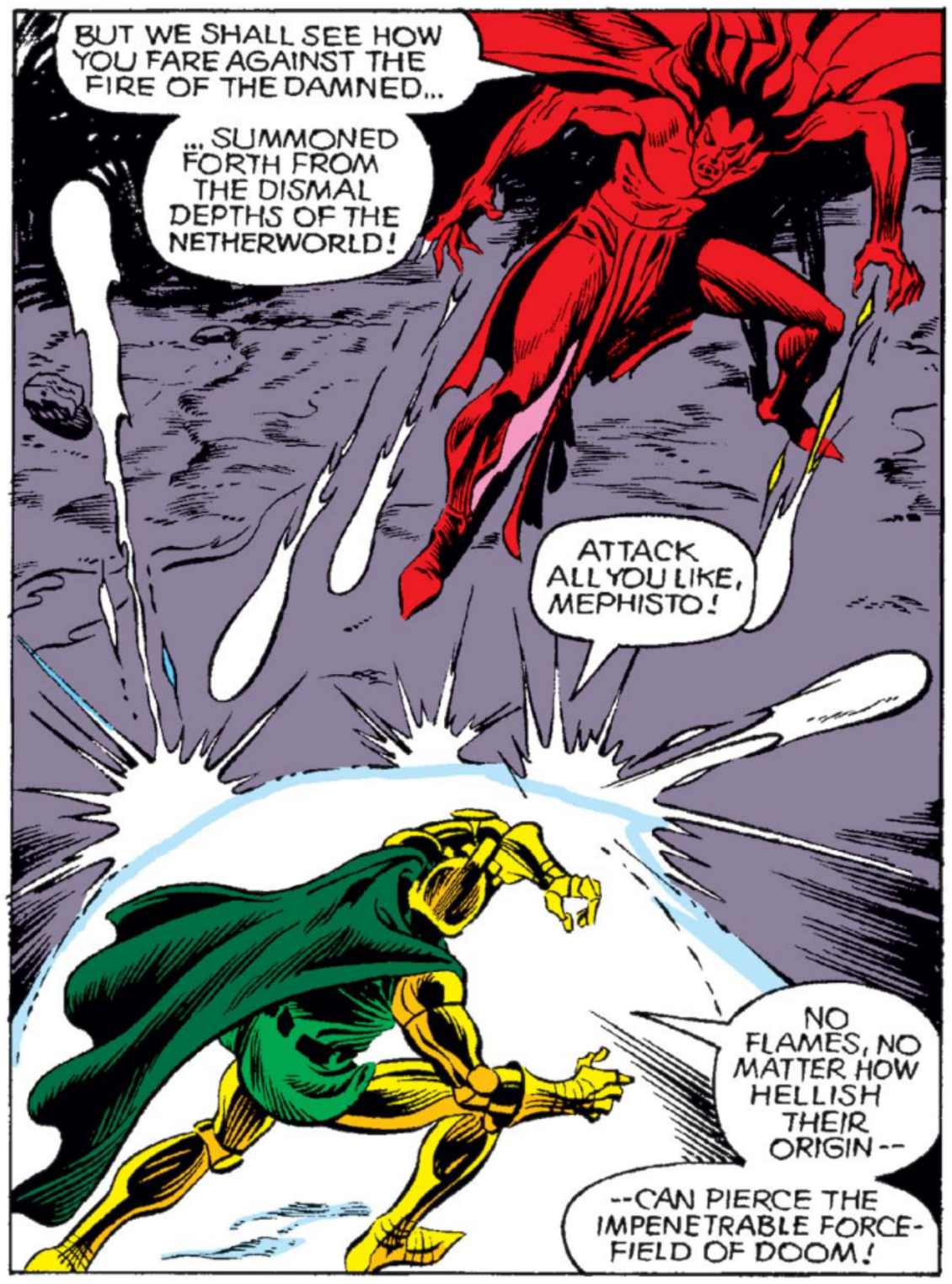

NEVER, YOU ETERNALLY-DAMNED DEMON!!
NOT AS LONG AS DOOM REMAINS TO FIGHT YOU FOR THEM!
FF-OSSH!
WHAT?!
YOU PRESUME MUCH, VON DOOM...
...TO THINK THAT YOU COULD REPEL THE LORD OF HELL WITH BLASTS OF FIRE!

BUT PRESUMPTION IS ONLY FOR FOOLS...
... MORTAL FOOLS WHOSE EARTHLY-FORGED ARMOR GROWS UNBEARABLY HEAVY--
--WHEN BUFFETED BY THE FORCE OF MEPHISTO'S STYGIAN GALES!

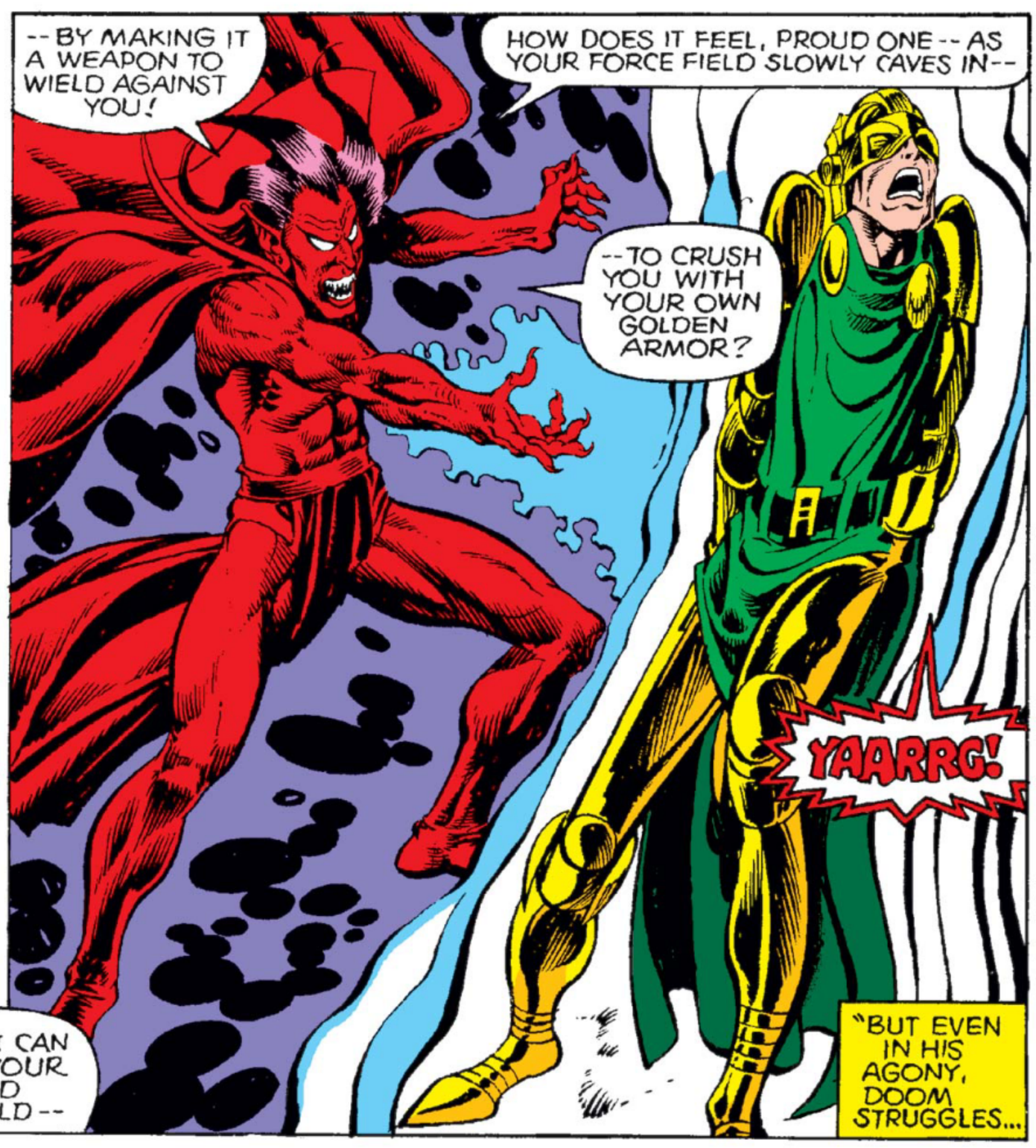

PERHAPS THE WEIGHT OF YOUR ATTIRE MAKES YOU GROW WEARY, VON DOOM...
... FORCING CLOSED YOUR EYELIDS AS YOU DROP OFF INTO WELCOME SLUMBER--
--AND YOU DREAM OF A GROTESQUE DEMON, WHOSE LIKE HAUNTS YOUR DARKEST NIGHTMARES!
YET, UNLIKE SOME MERE PHANTASM--


--THIS NIGHTMARISH BEING HAS THE POWER TO TAKE ON PHYSICAL FORM...
... AND, WITH LITTLE EFFORT YET GREAT PLEASURE--
--SLAY YOU WITHOUT MERCY!


YOUR SPELL IS POWERFUL, DEVIL! BUT I'LL NOT BE SLAIN BY A DREAM...
... NOT AS LONG AS I CAN BATTLE YOUR CONJURED HORROR WITH MY OWN COUNTER-SPELL--
--AND CAST IT BACK INTO HELL!
YOU ARE INDEED RESOURCEFUL, VON DOOM!


BUT WE SHALL SEE HOW YOU FARE AGAINST THE FIRE OF THE DAMNED...
... SUMMONED FORTH FROM THE DISMAL DEPTHS OF THE NETHERWORLD!
ATTACK ALL YOU LIKE, MEPHISTO!
NO FLAMES, NO MATTER HOW HELLISH THEIR ORIGIN--
--CAN PIERCE THE IMPENETRABLE FORCE-FIELD OF DOOM!

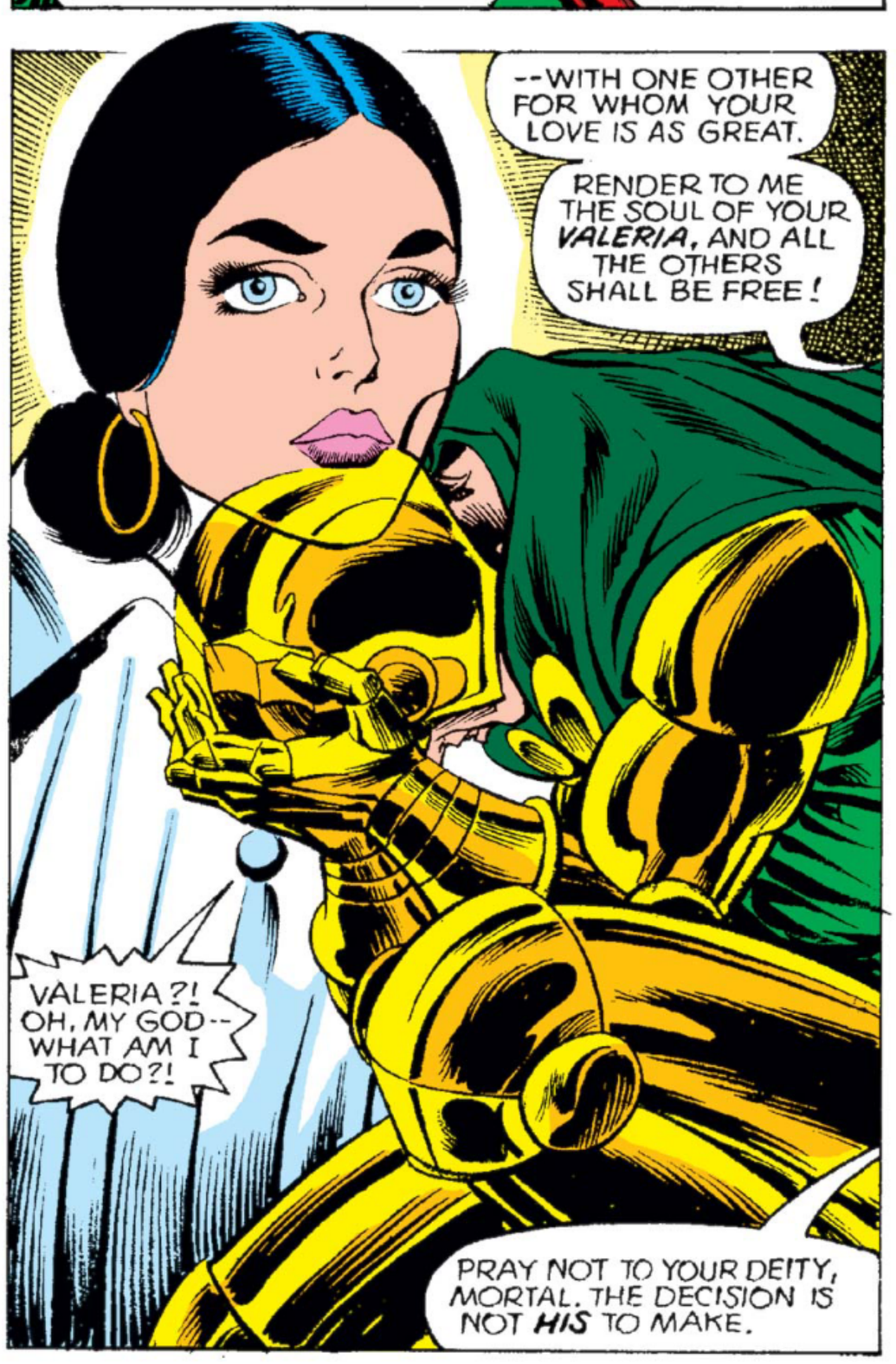
PERHAPS YOUR MORTAL'S TONGUE DOES NOT EXAGGERATE.
YET THERE IS NO NEED TO TEST YOUR AUDACIOUS CLAIM...
...WHEN I CAN UTILIZE YOUR VAUNTED FORCEFIELD--

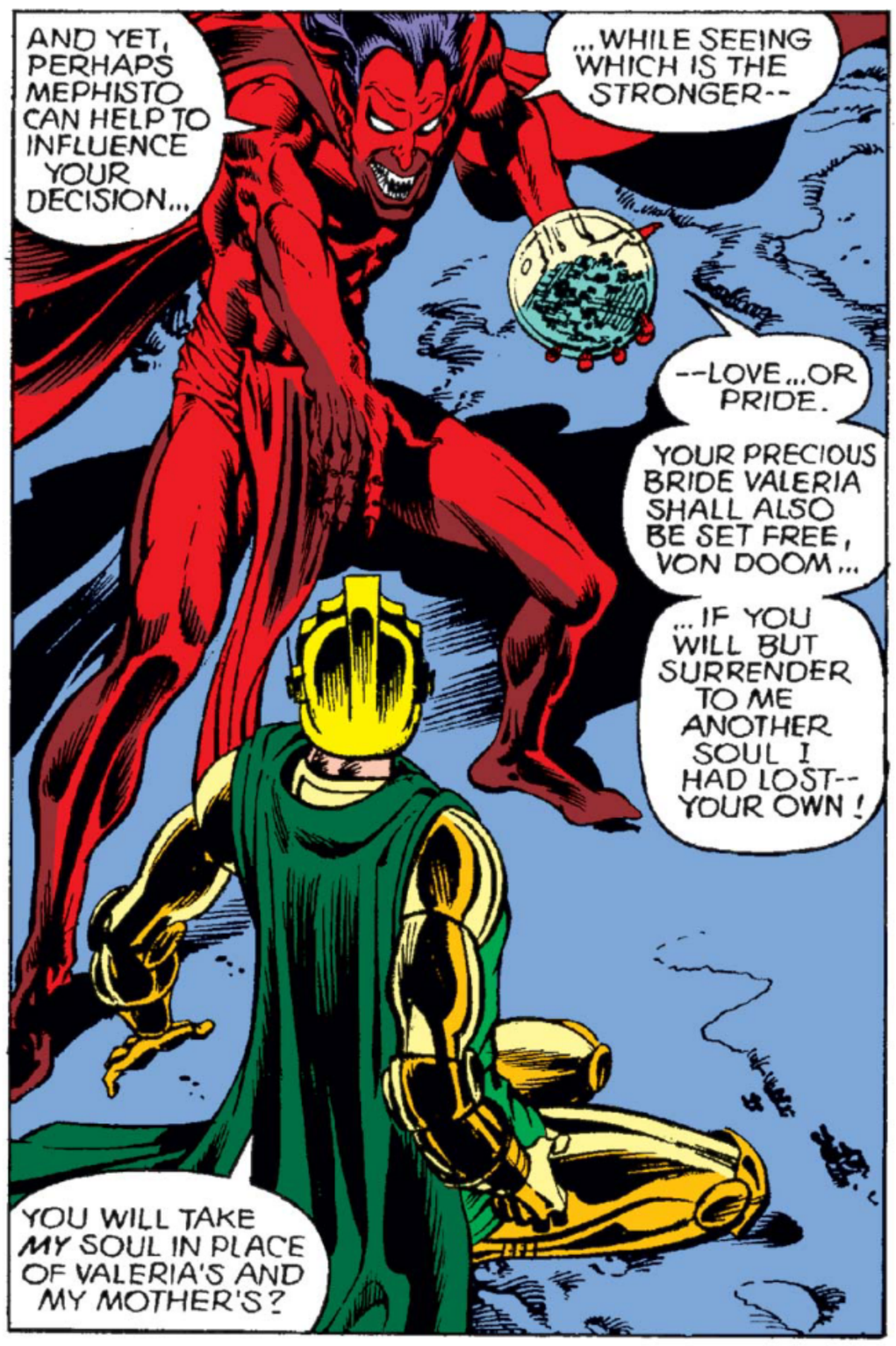

--BY MAKING IT A WEAPON TO WIELD AGAINST YOU!
HOW DOES IT FEEL, PROUD ONE--AS YOUR FORCE FIELD SLOWLY CAVES IN--
--TO CRUSH YOU WITH YOUR OWN GOLDEN ARMOR?
YAARRG!
"BUT EVEN IN HIS AGONY, DOOM STRUGGLES...

"... STRAINING TO MANIPULATE HIS ARMOR'S HIDDEN CONTROLS, UNTIL--
THIS TIME IT SEEMS AS IF MEPHISTO WAS THE FOOL...
...TO BELIEVE THAT DOOM IS NOT THE MASTER OF HIS OWN INVENTIONS!
AGAIN YOU IMPRESS ME, MORTAL.
THUS, IT IS TIME THAT THIS LITTLE FARCE--
SPLAK!
--IS ENDED!
WHAT COLOSSAL CONCEIT YOU HAVE, VON DOOM...
...THINKING YOUR PUNY DEVICES EVER THREATENED ME...
...WHEN IN TRUTH, AT ANY MOMENT--
--I COULD HAVE SIMPLY DRAINED YOUR WORTHLESS LIFE FORCE...
...EVEN AS I BEGIN TO DO NOW...
...MAKING YOU GROW WEAKER, UNABLE TO EVEN MOVE!
I HAVE BEEN TOYING WITH YOU, MORTAL... AMUSING MYSELF WITH YOUR FUTILE DISPLAY OF POWER.
BUT NOW THAT WE UNDER-STAND ONE ANOTHER--
--I OFFER YOU A PROPOSITION.
...PROPOSITION?

A QUITE SIMPLE PROPOSITION, REALLY... ONE WHICH INVOLVES THE FATES OF MORE THAN A THOUSAND SOULS!
AH! DO THE WORDS OF MEPHISTO INTRIGUE YOU?
WILL YOU GIVE AUDIENCE TO THE DARK PRINCE'S PROPOSAL?
WHEN YOU HOLD IN YOUR VERY HAND THE SOULS OF ALL THOSE I HOLD DEAR--
--WHAT ELSE CAN I DO BUT LISTEN, DEMON?

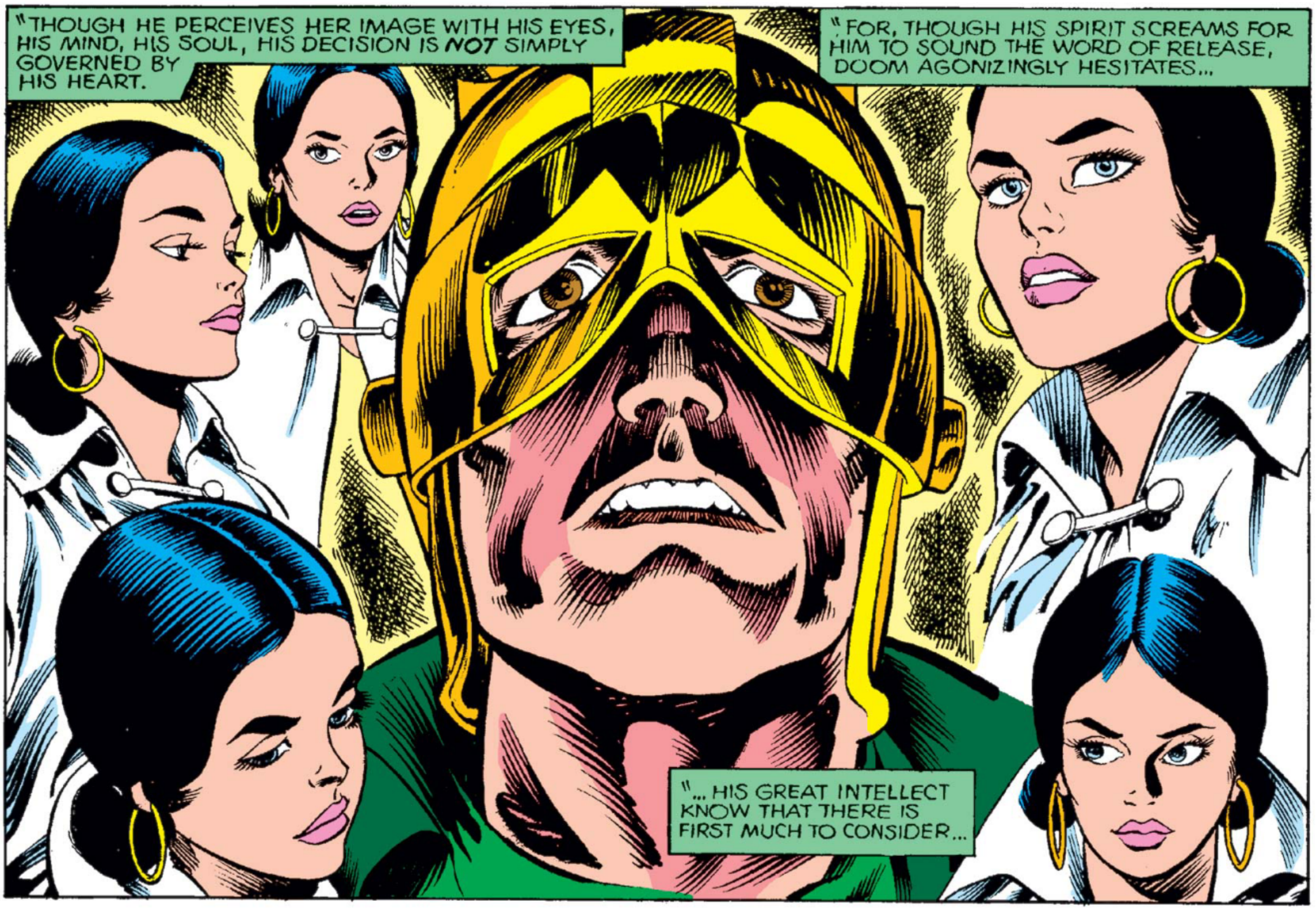
AS I PREDICTED YOU WOULD, VON DOOM. LISTEN, THEN, TO THE BENEVOLENCE IN MEPHISTO'S WORDS.
WHAT NEEDS THE LORD OF THE NETHERWORLD WITH YET ANOTHER SURFEIT OF SOULS OVERCROWDING MY RANKS OF THE DAMNED--
--WHEN IT WAS BUT ONE SOUL YOU STOLE FROM MY REALM...
... THAT OF YOUR WITCH-MOTHER CYNTHIA!
... AND I SHALL SET FREE YOUR PRECIOUS LATVERIAN NATION.
YOU HAVE BUT TO SAY THE WORD, VON DOOM...
ALL I ASK IS THAT YOU RESTORE THE BALANCE IN MY DOMAIN BY REPLACING THE ABSENT SOUL OF YOUR MOTHER--

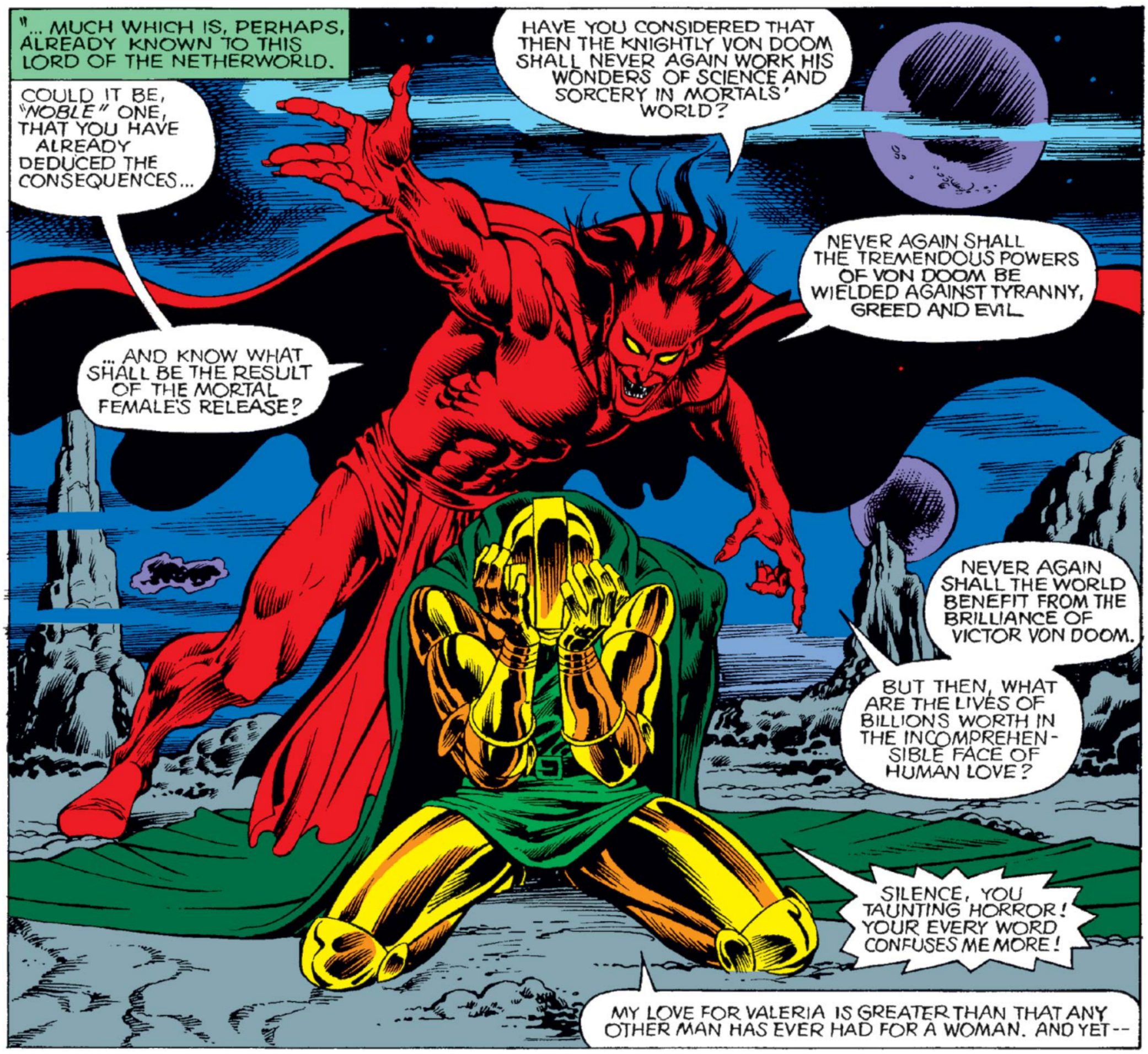

--WITH ONE OTHER FOR WHOM YOUR LOVE IS AS GREAT.
RENDER TO ME THE SOUL OF YOUR VALERIA, AND ALL THE OTHERS SHALL BE FREE!
VALERIA?! OH, MY GOD-- WHAT AM I TO DO?!
PRAY NOT TO YOUR DEITY, MORTAL. THE DECISION IS NOT HIS TO MAKE.


AND YET, PERHAPS MEPHISTO CAN HELP TO INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION...
...WHILE SEEING WHICH IS THE STRONGER--
--LOVE...OR PRIDE.
YOUR PRECIOUS BRIDE VALERIA SHALL ALSO BE SET FREE, VON DOOM...
...IF YOU WILL BUT SURRENDER TO ME ANOTHER SOUL I HAD LOST-- YOUR OWN!
YOU WILL TAKE MY SOUL IN PLACE OF VALERIA'S AND MY MOTHER'S?

A FAIR ENOUGH BARGAIN, EVEN BY A MORTAL'S STANDARDS. WOULD YOU NOT AGREE?
A SOUL FOR A SOUL...
NOT UNLIKE YOUR OWN SACRED BOOK'S DEMAND OF "AN EYE FOR AN EYE."
QUIET, EVIL ONE!
I'M TRYING... TO THINK!

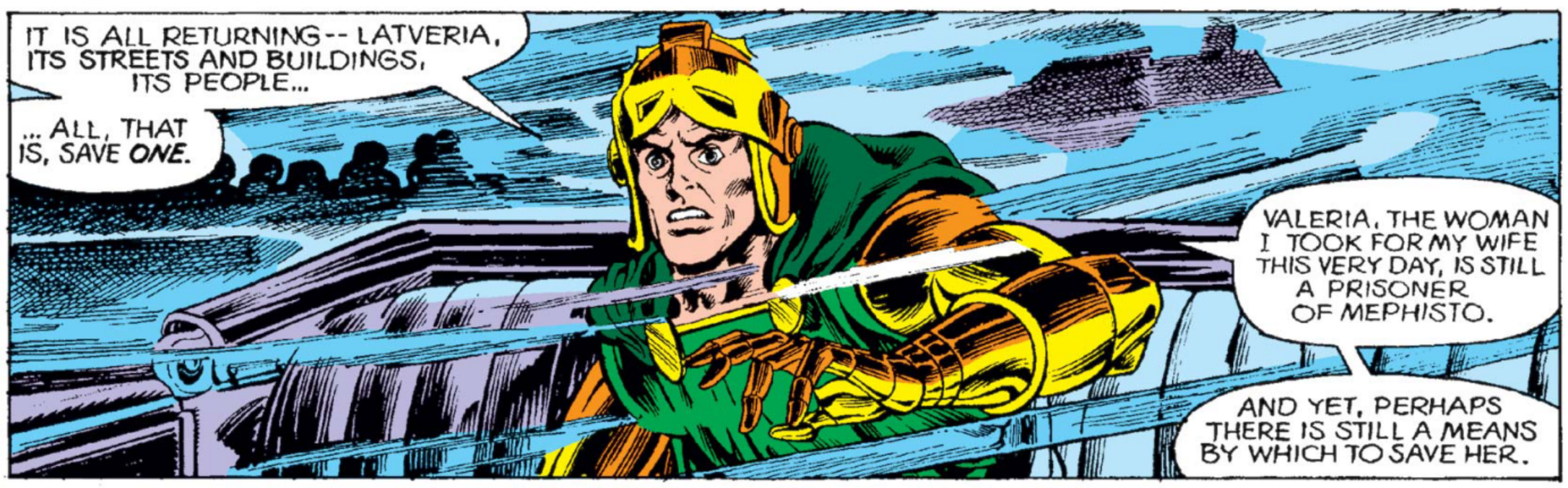
BUT WHAT IS THERE TO THINK UPON, GOLDEN ONE? JUST GIVE ME AN APPROVING NOD OF YOUR HELMETED HEAD--
--AND THE WOMAN THAT YOU LOVE SHALL BE INSTANTLY RELEASED FROM THE CONFINING GLOBE.
OR, COULD THERE POSSIBLY BE REASONS WHICH DELAY YOUR HEART-FELT DECISION?
PERHAPS IF I ALLOW YOU TO SEE YOUR VALERIA...
... YOU WILL GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER.

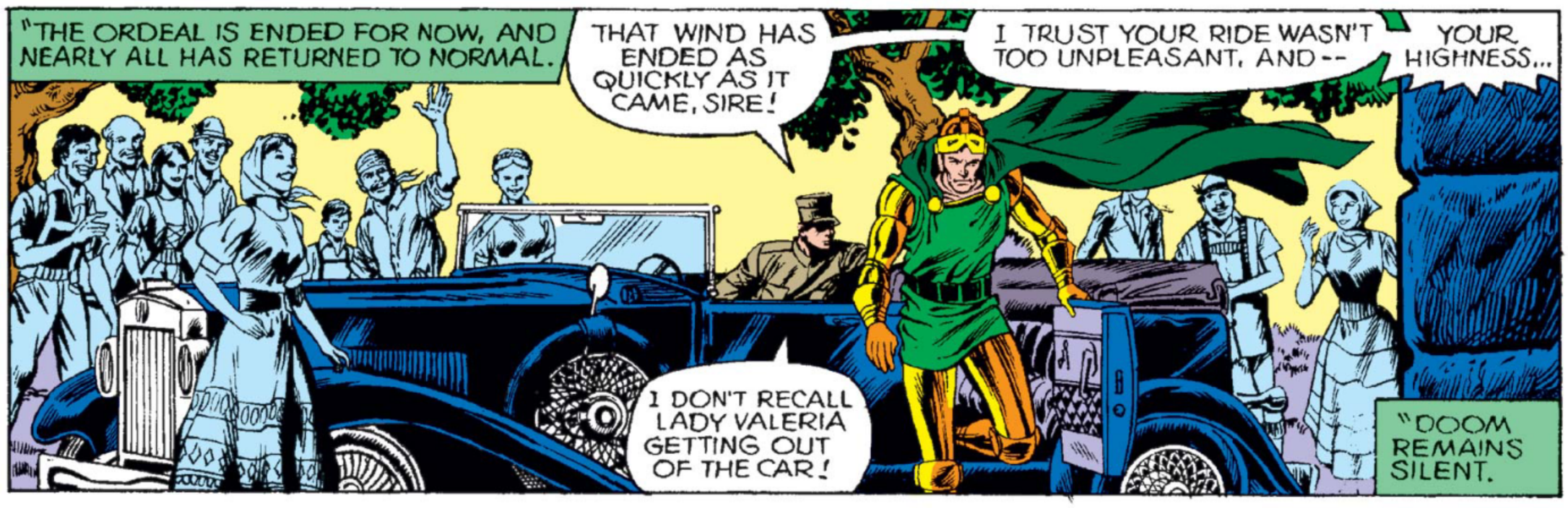

"THOUGH HE PERCEIVES HER IMAGE WITH HIS EYES, HIS MIND, HIS SOUL, HIS DECISION IS NOT SIMPLY GOVERNED BY HIS HEART.
"FOR, THOUGH HIS SPIRIT SCREAMS FOR HIM TO SOUND THE WORD OF RELEASE, DOOM AGONIZINGLY HESITATES...
"... HIS GREAT INTELLECT KNOW THAT THERE IS FIRST MUCH TO CONSIDER...

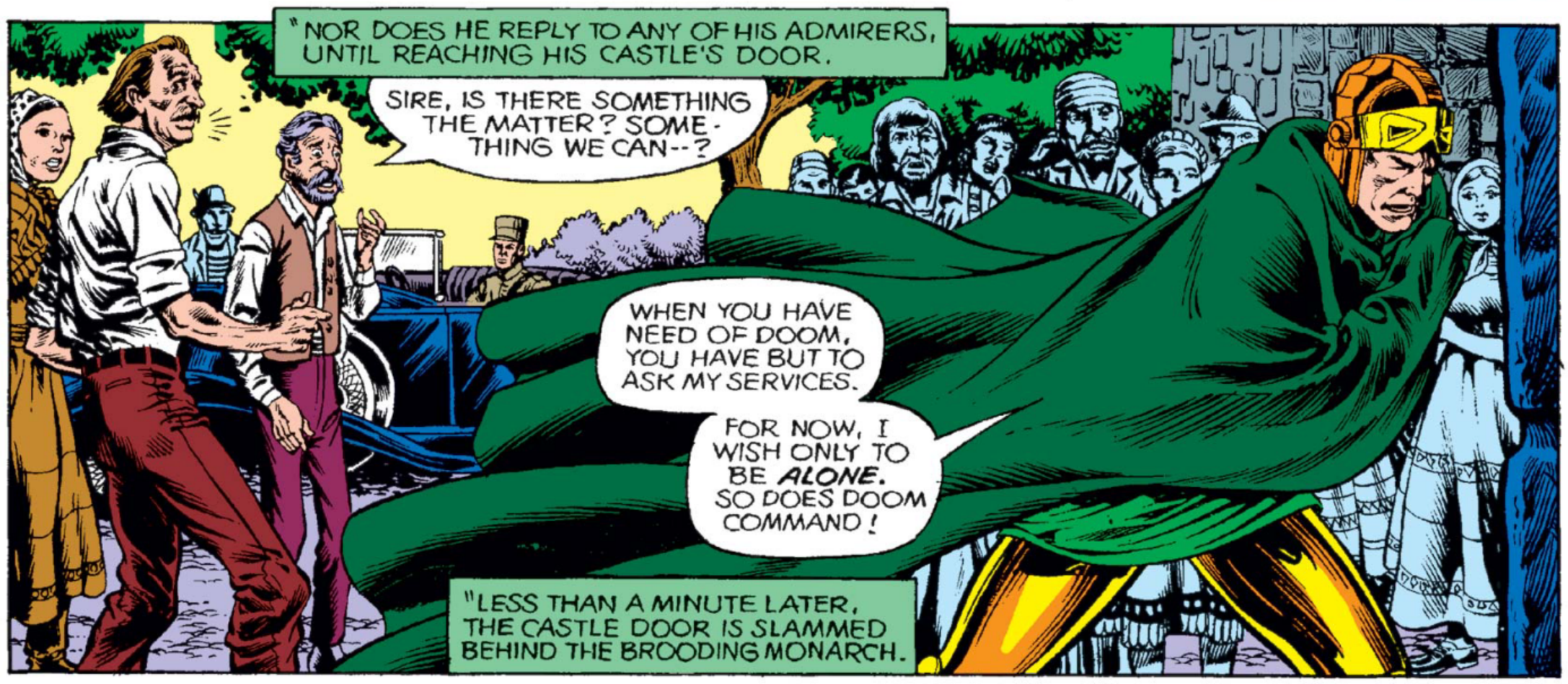

"... MUCH WHICH IS, PERHAPS, ALREADY KNOWN TO THIS LORD OF THE NETHERWORLD.
COULD IT BE, "NOBLE" ONE, THAT YOU HAVE ALREADY DEDUCED THE CONSEQUENCES...
... AND KNOW WHAT SHALL BE THE RESULT OF THE MORTAL FEMALE'S RELEASE?
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT THEN THE KNIGHTLY VON DOOM SHALL NEVER AGAIN WORK HIS WONDERS OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY IN MORTALS' WORLD?
NEVER AGAIN SHALL THE TREMENDOUS POWERS OF VON DOOM BE WIELDED AGAINST TYRANNY, GREED AND EVIL.
NEVER AGAIN SHALL THE WORLD BENEFIT FROM THE BRILLIANCE OF VICTOR VON DOOM.
BUT THEN, WHAT ARE THE LIVES OF BILLIONS WORTH IN THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE FACE OF HUMAN LOVE?
SILENCE, YOU TAUNTING HORROR! YOUR EVERY WORD CONFUSES ME MORE!
MY LOVE FOR VALERIA IS GREATER THAN THAT ANY OTHER MAN HAS EVER HAD FOR A WOMAN. AND YET--

AND YET, MORTAL, THE LOVE WHICH YOU PROFESS FOR THIS WOMAN IS, PERHAPS, NOT AS GREAT--
--AS THE DEEPLY-ROOTED PRIDE THAT SO CHARACTERIZES THIS ARMORED REDEEMER OF ALL MANKIND.
MEPHISTO DEMANDS AN IMMEDIATE ANSWER, VICTOR VON DOOM. WHOSE SPIRIT SHALL BE MINE...
...YOURS OR THAT OF THE FAIR VALERIA?
THE WORLD... MUST NOT... BE DEPRIVED...
... OF DOOM!
"HARDLY DOES EVEN A HEARTBEAT FOLLOW THE SPEAKING OF HIS OWN NAME--

"... THAN IT HAPPENS. THE WINDS THAT SWEPT HIS HOMELAND AWAY AND INTO THE GRASP OF MEPHISTO COME AGAIN...
"... THE PRINCE OF THE NETHERWORLD VANISHES FROM DOOM'S SIGHT...
"... TO BE REPLACED BY COMFORTINGLY FAMILIAR SHAPES.


IT IS ALL RETURNING -- LATVERIA, ITS STREETS AND BUILDINGS, ITS PEOPLE...
... ALL, THAT IS, SAVE ONE.
VALERIA, THE WOMAN I TOOK FOR MY WIFE THIS VERY DAY, IS STILL A PRISONER OF MEPHISTO.
AND YET, PERHAPS THERE IS STILL A MEANS BY WHICH TO SAVE HER.


"THE ORDEAL IS ENDED FOR NOW, AND NEARLY ALL HAS RETURNED TO NORMAL.
THAT WIND HAS ENDED AS QUICKLY AS IT CAME, SIRE!
I TRUST YOUR RIDE WASN'T TOO UNPLEASANT, AND --
YOUR HIGHNESS...
I DON'T RECALL LADY VALERIA GETTING OUT OF THE CAR!
"DOOM REMAINS SILENT.

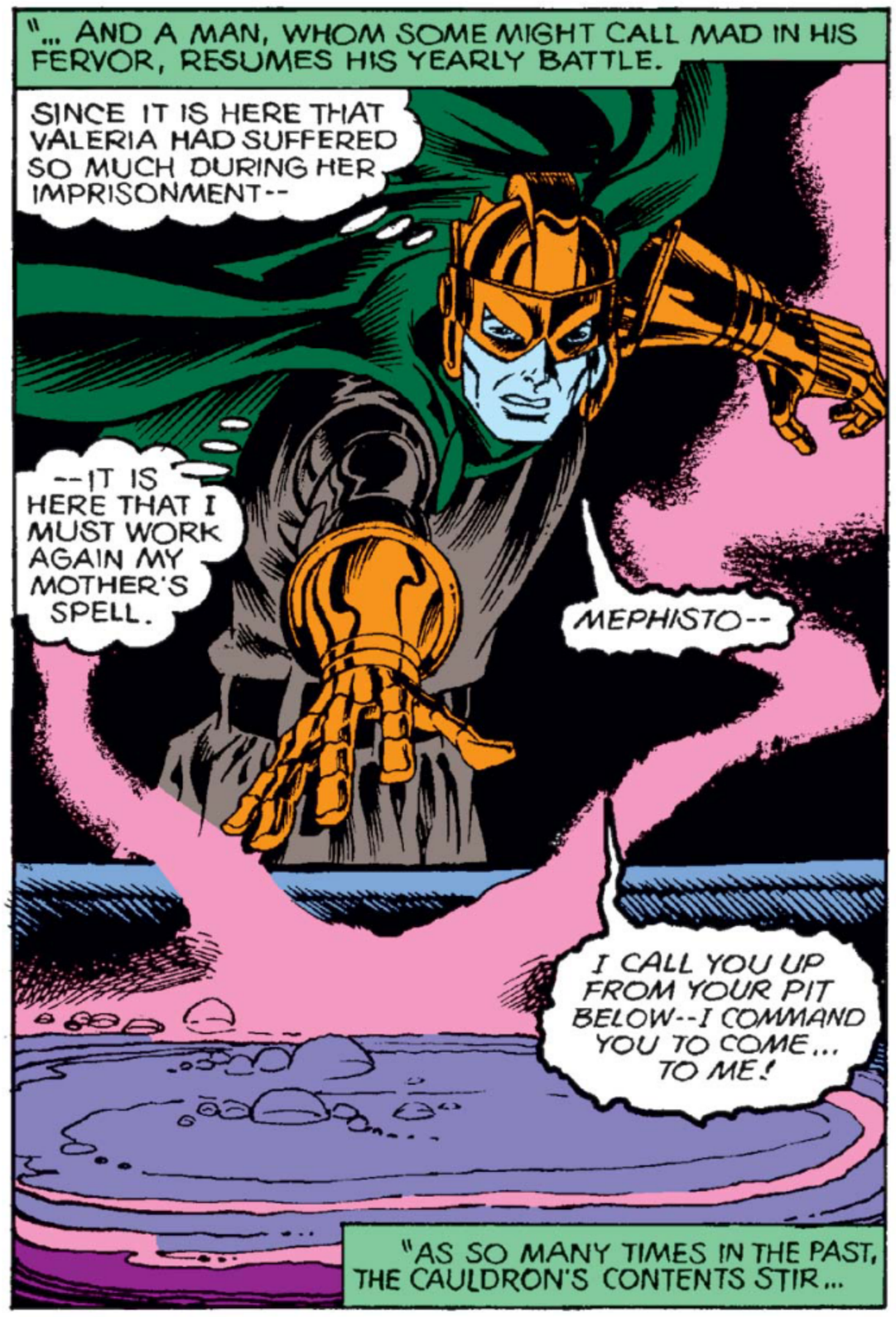

"NOR DOES HE REPLY TO ANY OF HIS ADMIRERS, UNTIL REACHING HIS CASTLE'S DOOR.
SIRE, IS THERE SOMETHING THE MATTER? SOMETHING WE CAN--?
WHEN YOU HAVE NEED OF DOOM, YOU HAVE BUT TO ASK MY SERVICES.
FOR NOW, I WISH ONLY TO BE ALONE. SO DOES DOOM COMMAND!
"LESS THAN A MINUTE LATER, THE CASTLE DOOR IS SLAMMED BEHIND THE BROODING MONARCH.

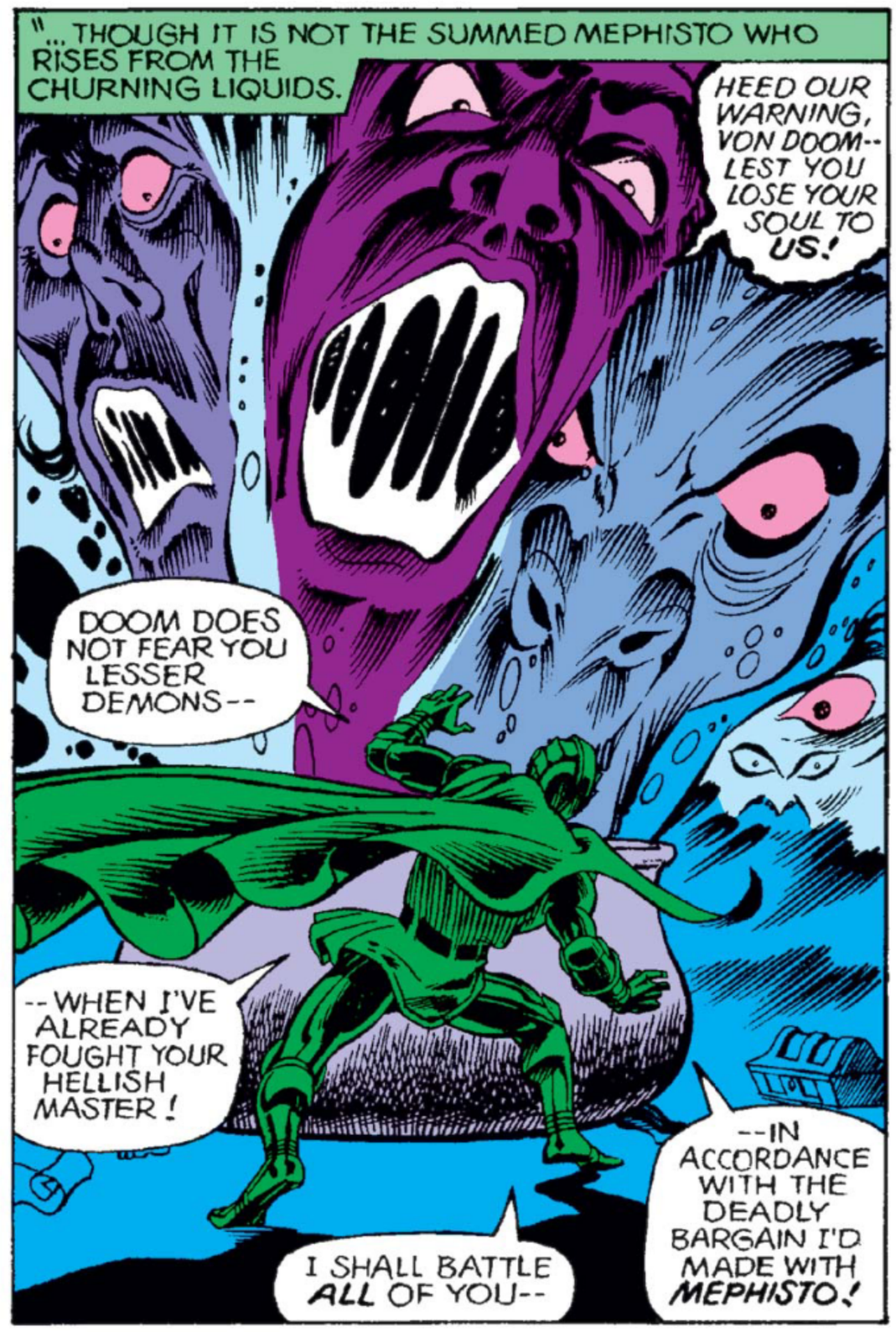
"THE YEARS WHICH PASS GO UNCOUNTED BY THE ARMORED MONARCH CALLED DOOM... AS DO THE VIOLENT TORRENTS WHICH FREQUENTLY LASH AGAINST HIS CASTLE'S ERODED RAMPARTS.

"YET, DURING THOSE FORGOTTEN YEARS, THE ***LEGEND*** OF DOOM CONTINUES TO GROW-- THAT OF A GREAT BENEFACTOR AND AVENGER...

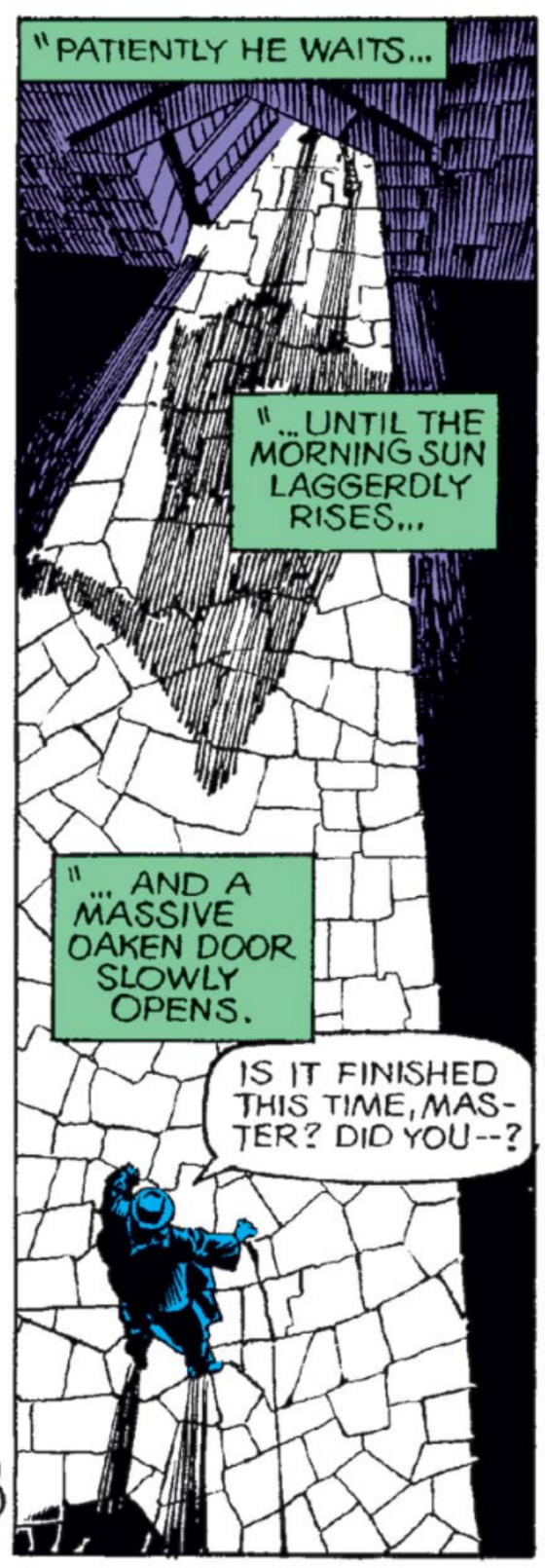
"... A PROUD AND NOBLE CHAMPION, WHO WOULD RISK HIS ALL IN THE SERVICE OF HIS FELLOW MAN...

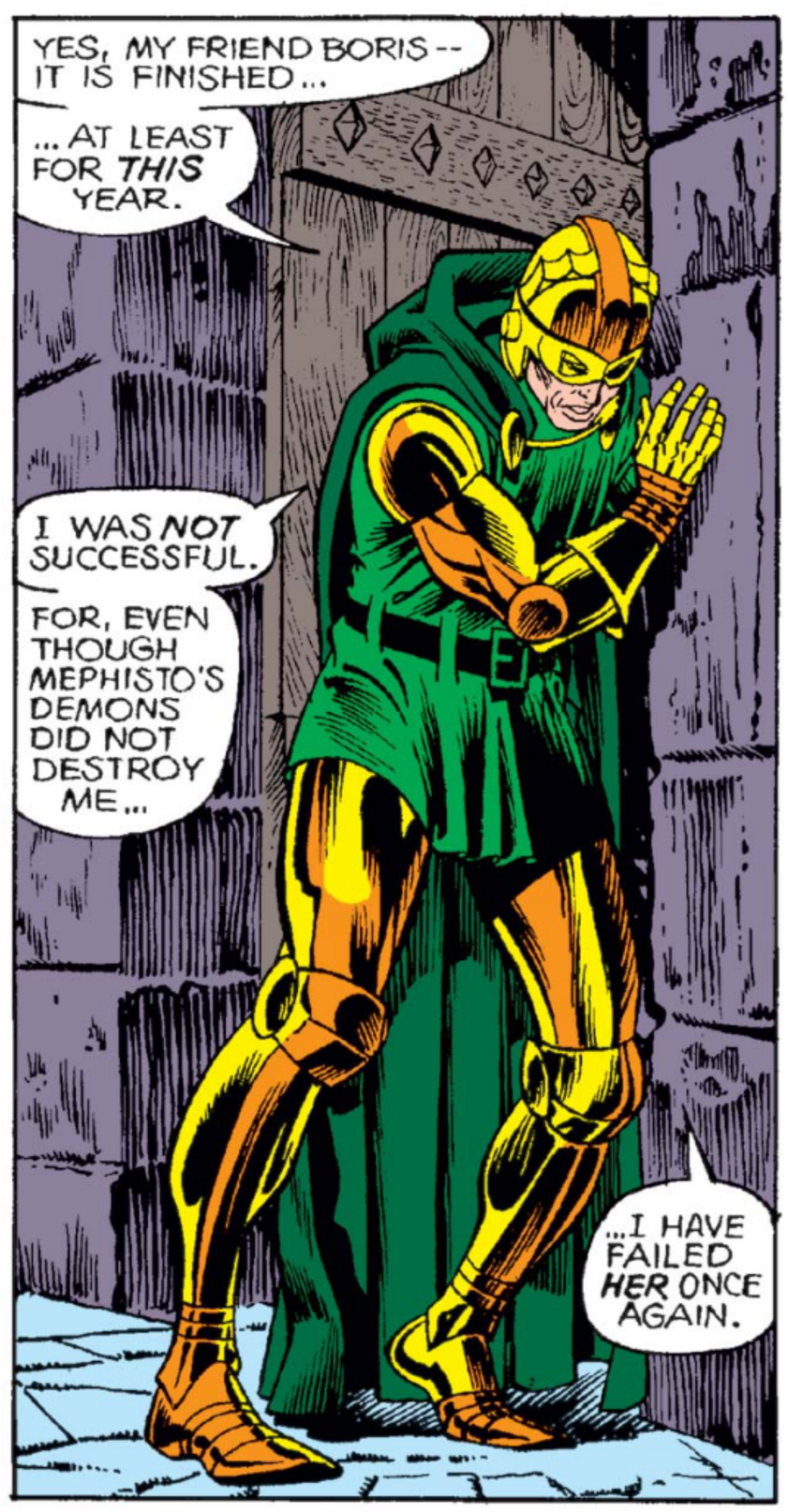
"...SAVE, THAT IS, UPON THIS DEMON-HAUNTED AND STORMY NIGHT...

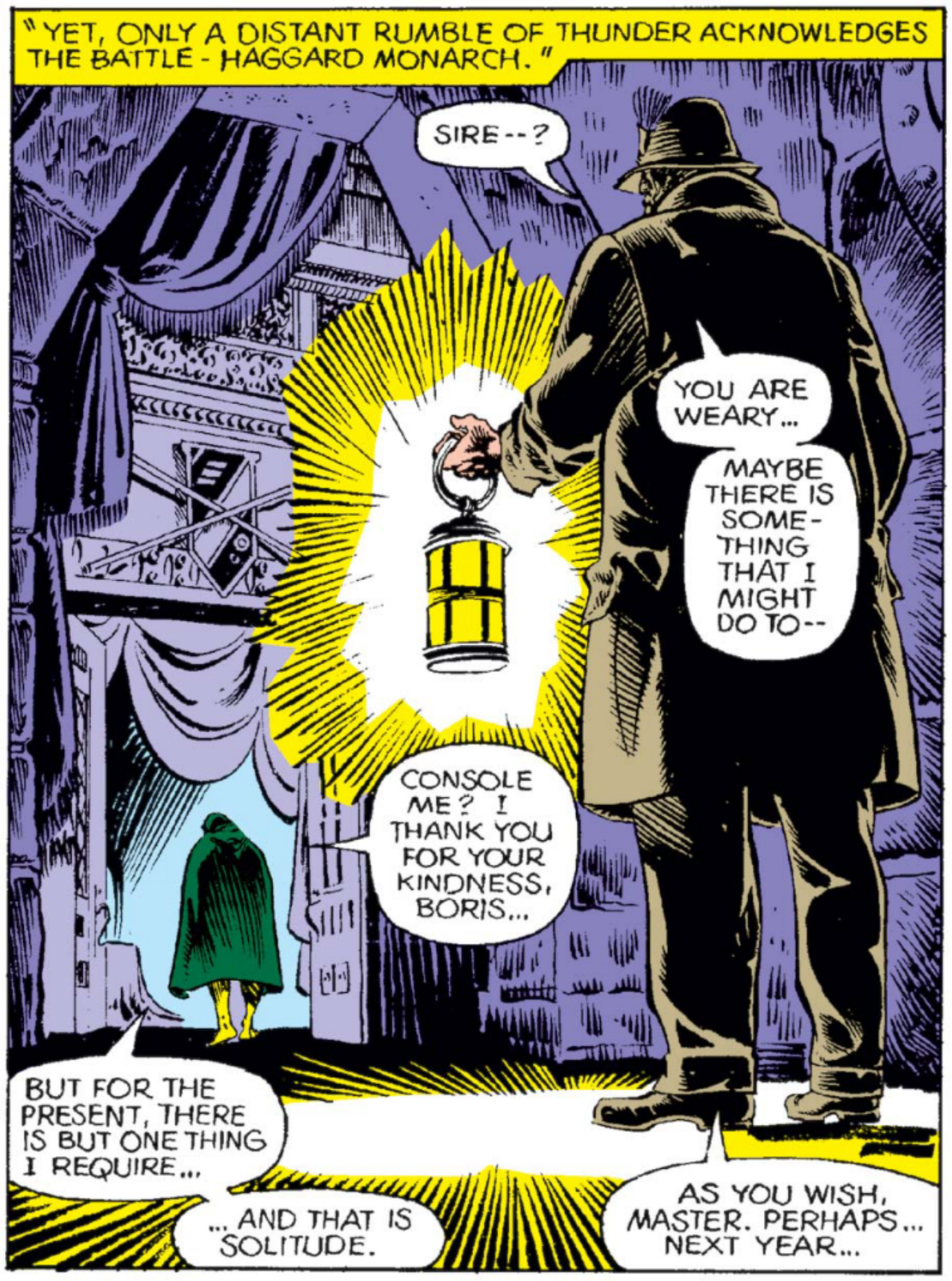

"... AND A MAN, WHOM SOME MIGHT CALL MAD IN HIS FERVOR, RESUMES HIS YEARLY BATTLE.
SINCE IT IS HERE THAT VALERIA HAD SUFFERED SO MUCH DURING HER IMPRISONMENT--
--IT IS HERE THAT I MUST WORK AGAIN MY MOTHER'S SPELL.
MEPHISTO--
I CALL YOU UP FROM YOUR PIT BELOW--I COMMAND YOU TO COME... TO ME!
"AS SO MANY TIMES IN THE PAST, THE CAULDRON'S CONTENTS STIR...


"... THOUGH IT IS NOT THE SUMMED MEPHISTO WHO RISES FROM THE CHURNING LIQUIDS.
HEED OUR WARNING, VON DOOM-- LEST YOU LOSE YOUR SOUL TO US!
DOOM DOES NOT FEAR YOU LESSER DEMONS--
--WHEN I'VE ALREADY FOUGHT YOUR HELLISH MASTER!
I SHALL BATTLE ALL OF YOU--
--IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE DEADLY BARGAIN I'D MADE WITH MEPHISTO!

" WHILE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BOLTED DUNGEON DOOR...
ONCE AGAIN COME THE SOUNDS OF HELL.
I PRAY THIS TIME MY LEIGE IS SUCCESSFUL...
...BEFORE HE LOSES HIS SOUL TO THE LORD OF EVIL.


"PATIENTLY HE WAITS...
"...UNTIL THE MORNING SUN LAGGERDLY RISES...
"... AND A MASSIVE OAKEN DOOR SLOWLY OPENS.
IS IT FINISHED THIS TIME, MASTER? DID YOU--?


YES, MY FRIEND BORIS-- IT IS FINISHED...
...AT LEAST FOR THIS YEAR.
I WAS NOT SUCCESSFUL.
FOR, EVEN THOUGH MEPHISTO'S DEMONS DID NOT DESTROY ME...
...I HAVE FAILED HER ONCE AGAIN.



NEXT

WHAT IF THE HULK'S GIRLFRIEND JARELLA HAD NOT DIED?

WHY NOT?

c/o MARVEL COMICS GROUP
575 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022

DENNIS O'NEIL
EDITOR
MARK GRUENWALD
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Denny and Mark,

WHAT IF #19 ("What if Spider-Man caught the burglar that killed his uncle?") is quite probably the most outrageous tale this mag has yet presented. It seems to me that every time writer Pete Gillis goes to work he hits gold. The best aspect of the story to me was the keying in on one line from Spider-Man's origin in AMAZING FANTASY #15 and exploring it to its ultimate end. That line, referring to Peter Parker's aunt and uncle, was "I'll see to it that they're always happy, and the rest of the world can go hang for all I care!" I'll tell you, that line sent a chill down my spine the first time I read it, and from it Gillis extracted the radically different character of a selfish, power- and glory-seeking Spider-Man. It was not a pretty sight to watch.

Pat Broderick's off-kilter illustrations added to the strange, twisted atmosphere. Of particular interest was the gradual metamorphosis of Parker's appearance into a total California me-person. In addition, the scenes of him being an agent and its results offered the biggest horselaughs seen in this book since Scott Shaw's funny-animal send-up.

All told, a really powerful issue, one which fulfilled quite a bit of this book's potential. Let's see more issues with this kind of punch.

Ray Veldboom
R.R. #1
Cedar Grove, WI 53013

We're in there punching every issue, Roy — whether we make a k.o. every time up is for you readers to decide. Most of you did decide that WHAT IF #19 hit the mark, as almost ninety percent of the mail was positive. Here's a sample...
——mg.

Dear Marvel,

WHAT IF #19 can be compared to the motion picture *Network* in that both showed how media power can drive men mad. By having Spidey stop the crook that would have killed Uncle Ben, writer Peter Gillis showed that crime-fighting was not the only career that Peter Parker could have pursued. Exploiting his powers for personal fame, Parker rises from film star to promoter to film-maker. In spite of the tragic tone to the tale's end (to illustrate belatedly that with great powers comes great responsibility), this tale was not without its humorous touches: Spidey subbing for Carson, Brando and Hackman in the Spider-Man movie, Spidey giving Jameson a reward for exposing his identity, Spidey buying Marvel, Spidey telling Daredevil to change his costume, etc. I enjoyed these touches. I was surprised at first that Spider-Man would hide behind Daredevil when confronted by super-villains, but then I realized that Spider-Man had never fought with anyone for real in this alternate world. In all, Peter Gillis turned in another great story. Don't underwork him.

APO Frank Titone
61 Precinct
2575 Coney Island Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11223

Don't worry, Frank, we're keeping the essential Mr. Gillis as busy as we can. He's got another feature-length WHAT IF or two in the works, as well as a fabulous new back-up series, the concept of which we're still keeping under wraps. Not everyone appreciated Peter's humorous touches, however. Witness...

Dear Marvel,

How's this for an idea? What if WHAT IF #19 had been treated seriously? I'm sorry to be so blunt, but issue #19 was a real disappointment. When I first saw the cover I was quite excited. The idea of him making such a change was bound to be interesting, right? Wrong. Spidey becoming capitalistic and acting as a p.r. man for other heroes was downright dumb. As for the artwork, I can't believe Pat Broderick did so badly after so many great CAPTAIN MARVELs. It resembled a parody of Spider-Man rather than an actual story with the wall-crawler in it. Peter Parker looked too much like Rick Jones. Now that I've finished my tirade, I'd like to ask another question: why is it in the last few WHAT IFs (Dr. Strange, Shang-Chi, and now this) that the hero makes a complete change from what we know him to be and then reverts back after some crisis? Are we going to have to expect this every month?

John B. Lawton III
3649 Maria St.
Las Vegas, NV 89121

Well, John, we have no policy governing the endings of our tales of alternity, we just ask that the writer be as dramatic as possible and true to the characters involved. In the cases you cite, the protagonists had strong character traits that great reversals in their lives could not extinguish. I think it would be unfair to say that the heroes ended up exactly like they did on Marvel-Earth. Their characters could not help but have been affected by the course of these alternate events. Anyway, differences of opinion are what make interesting letters pages. Thanks for writing.
——mg.

Dear Bullpen,

I just read WHAT IF #19 and felt compelled to comment. The idea of this story shows what the whole series is about: you took an important turning point in a character's life and showed what might have happened had it turned out another way. You kept true to Peter Parker's basic character but cast him into a situation in which that character went through changes, and the result was a fascinating story.

There were, however, two problems that cropped up in the tale. But never fear, I also figured out solutions for you. The first one concerns Spidey's famed spider-sense that, among other things, warns him of danger. The question is why didn't it warn him of the trap Jameson had set, or Kraven the Hunter's presense, or the electrical trap in "Dragoom"? The answer is two-fold: first off, Peter grew so overconfident never actually fighting crime tht he simply ignored his senses. Secondly, in regards the fight on pages 35-36: all of his opponents were a threat, and he wasn't trained to perceive distinctions among them as to which one (Kraven, in this case) was the biggest threat.

The other problem was Spider-Man's on-again, off-again underarm webs. One solution is that they only can be seen under certain lighting. The other might be that the "ice-blue deodorant" he was selling on *The Tonight Show* was failing him and dissolving the webs. Sounds good to me.

Well, until Spidey becomes a meter maid, make mine Marvel.

Tim Glutek
MacDonald Hall
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario

Thanks, Tim. Your solutions seem reasonable to us. See how much fun it is, not only spotting our foul-ups but coming up with an explanation for them? That is the sort of creative activity we like to encourage by giving our No-Prizes. Consider yourself so honored, Tim. And speaking of those non-existent items of contention...
—mg.

WHY NOT PUT THE KNOW BACK IN THE NO-PRIZE?

Back in WHAT IF #19, we printed an item concerning the number of people who wrote in about the Nova WHAT IF for the sole purpose of making a bid for a no-prize. We pointed out how the concept of the no-prize had devolved in the last decade from an honorary reward for meritorious service to Marveldom Assembled into a mere token for booboo-finding. And so, in an effort to make no-prizes meaningful again, to make them reward creativity not nitpickiness, we challenged our WHAT IF readers to help us come up with a solution to the thorny question: "Why didn't the female Nova's helmet protect her from Invisible Girl's force-bubble attack?" We are very happy to report that you merry Marvelites didn't let your beleaguered bullpen down — twelve of you answered the challenge and came up with good solutions. And so, we'd hereby like to award the following friends of Marvel with new improved No-Prizes for bailing us out of a tight spot with your creativity:

Howard F. Hellen
Lexington, KY

James Pickett
Brockton, MA

Brad Pieterse
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Louis Bank **St. Charles, IL**	**Jim Elstrom** **Valley City, NV**	**Rick Jones** **Argos, IN**
Bill Mulligan **Clayton, MO**	**Chris Ankner** **Western Springs, IL**	**Kevin C. Julius** **Erie, PA**
Mark Barbera **Bay Shore, NY**	**Anthony Breaux** **Litchfield Park, AZ**	**Wayne Hensen** **Melbourne, FL**

The solution we liked best (mainly because it was the simplest) was that Invisible Girl projected her force sphere *under* Nova's helmet not *around* it, cutting Nova off from the air supply of both the helmet and her environment. Messers. Hellen, Pieterse, Bank, and Breaux presented variations on that explanation. Congratulations, all twelve of you. As for the rest of you out there... if you should spot a real mistake in one of our multifarious mags, don't just report it, help us *explain* it... and you too might earn a new improved No-Prize!

While we're on the subject, here's an interesting letter...

O'Neil and Gruenwald,

Re: the No-Prize. As you state on your letters page, we need a return to the old days when readers did more than point out errors, they tried to help explain them. This is the kind of "meritorious service" Marvel needs from its fans because the Marvel Universe has grown too big for any one writer, or one bullpen, to keep track of. I suggest the following plan to achieve this goal:

1) Don't give no-prizes to nit-pickers. Award them only to those who present both problem and solution, or show why a solution is not possible (so you can tell us to go back and change a line in our mint copy of FANTASTIC FOUR #14).

2) Tell us which solution is correct and will be considered an official addition to the lore of the Marvel Universe. I remember old issues of HULK in which fans hypothesized that the Hulk's skin was green because of chlorophyll content. You printed it but never verified or denied it, and much, much later someone did a story where an alien examined the Hulk and found no chlorophyll. To have the chance that an explanation will become an official part of the Marvel Universe is quite an incentive for problem-solvers.

3) Do not limit no-prizes to solutions of story problems. Such things as showing how the stories in Spider-Man's three mags fit together, offering proof that Nick Fury knows that Peter Parker is Spider-Man, or pointing out that no colorist was listed for HULK #240 would still be no-prize material, in my opinion.

4) Please do not return to the old joke answers of the early days when some fans were afraid to write serious letters.

I'd be interested in learning other readers' opinions on this subject.

Rick Jones
Rt. 1
Argos, IN 46501

So would we, Rick. The suggestions you make would certainly help restore the No-Prize to its former grandeur. The problem, of course, would be to get all five of Marvel's editorial teams to agree to implement them. I would have to disagree with you on one small point, however, and that is that pointing out credit omissions and the like seem more to me like nit-pickiness than no-prizeworthiness. I would not worry about a return to wisecracking replies, though... all our Marvel writers (who are now signing their letters page answers) take their reader feedback very seriously. ——mg.

HOW ABOUT?

WHAT IF... the Silver Surfer had never discovered Earth?
WHAT IF... Victor Von Doom succeeded in rescuing his mother from Hell?
WHAT IF... the Sub-Mariner had never regained his memory (FF #4)? **(We have a back-up feature like this in the works. —mg.)**
WHAT IF... the original Cat (before Greer Nelson) hadn't died?

—David S. Marschall
Springfield, MA 01109

WHAT IF... all of Marvel's black super heroes formed a team?
WHAT IF... there was a team of animal mutants? **(The Legion of Mutant Pets? —mg.)**
WHAT IF... Terrax was Galactus' first herald, not the Surfer?

—Alvin Queen
Upper Marlboro, MA

WHAT IF... the Imperial Guard had defeated the X-Men in X-Men #107?
WHAT IF... Thunderbolt Ross had become the Hulk?

—Kevin Korson
Redondo Beach, CA

WHAT IF... Magneto had formed the X-Men? **(Chris Claremont has had a plot like this in the works for years now. Chris? —mg.)**

—Peter Stone
Montclair, NJ

WHAT IF... Conan battled the ancestors of the Sub-Mariner in the Hyborian Age?

—Brian Higgins
Osawatomie, KS

WHAT IF... Aunt May learned Peter was Spider-Man? **(This occurs in an upcoming tale. —mg.)**
WHAT IF... Captain America had lost his memory rather than going into suspended animation? **(He'd be quite an old codger by now, wouldn't he? —mg.)**
WHAT IF... Luke Cage had remained a criminal?
WHAT IF... Galactus destroyed the Earth and took the FF as heralds?

—Todd Benedict
Seattle, WA

THE WATCHER KNOWS...

(This installment's questions were provided by David and Jeffrey Lofvers of 44 Curtice Rd., Rochester, New York, 14617.)

Were the tales of the Invaders staying together after World War II and the so-called Avengers of the 1950's actually untold stories of Marvel-Earth?
The first one was, the second one was not. —The Watcher.

Is Adam Warlock actually dead or is his astral form residing in the dimension within the soulgem?
Warlock's spirit was trapped within the soulgem before it could be assimilated into the greater universe. —The Watcher.

Are Satan, Hela, Mephisto, and Pluto actually different physical forms of the same deathless being or does each exist in a different dimension?
All of the rulers of the nether-worlds are separate entities, existing on their own specific dimensional nether-worlds with their own spheres of dominion. Satan and Mephisto operate from tangent spheres of existence. —The Watcher.

What happened to Mantis the Celestial Madonna? Did she ever give birth to the Celestial Messiah?
Not as yet. She has been traveling through other realms of reality. She reportedly even ventured out of this multiverse. —The Watcher.

Does Rutland, Vermont annually becomes a nexus of realities similar to that existing in the swamp near Citrusville, Florida?
While the nexus in Citrusville is a natural aperture, the nexus near Rutland is an artificial one that fluctuates in size and accessibility. For reasons I have not investigated, it has not been opened in recent years. —The Watcher.

Rama-Tut and Kang the Conqueror both were described as living in the 31st Century, the same era that the time-traveling sorcerer Sise-Neg is from. Is there any connection?
Sise-Neg lived in a different alternate future than the other two time travelers. —The Watcher.

How does the Inhuman dog Lockjaw teleport through space, time, and other dimensions?
The creature is able to open artificial nexuses to whatever reality it wishes, nexuses that bypass time and space. —The Watcher.

That's it for this time, group. Next issue, be here for all-new excitement!

——mark gruenwald.